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ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT





# ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

HIS LIFE  
AND  
HIS WORLD

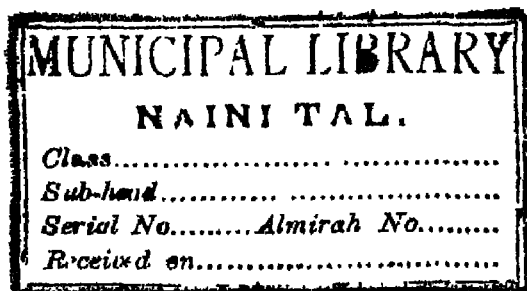
BY  
SAMUEL HOPKINS ADAMS



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TO THE THOUSAND FRIENDS OF  
ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT  
THIS BOOK IS WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING  
DEDICATED  
BY  
ONE OF THEM



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## FRAMEWORK FOR A PORTRAIT

BIOGRAPHY in the present tense is a ticklish business. So much of the personal element is collaterally involved, so many predilections and prejudices befog the atmosphere, that the writer finds himself confused in a maze of cross currents. Particularly is this true of a subject such as Alexander Woollcott, to whom the reaction of his associates tends to be poignant rather than judicial. Few, indeed, of those who knew him have been able to maintain neutrality of view. Opinions of him, whether in approval or dispraise, are high in emotional content. All this makes for difficulty of estimate. There have been many times during this work when I could have wished for myself a more remote and less controversial topic. Caligula, perhaps. He is comfortably out-of-date.

Alexander Woollcott is anything but out-of-date. In fact, I find it difficult to write of him as no longer of the active scene, so vigorously and effectively does he survive in many lives and influences. This is a solid testimony to his importance in his own time and environment. There are many greater and more influential contemporary figures; none more vivid; none, I think, quite so vivid. In this one respect he is another Beau Brummel or Disraeli, Cagliostro or Teddy Roosevelt. He will be longer remembered for what he was than for what he did.

One of the most trenchant of modern biographers prescribes a measure of dislike as the most advantageous attitude for a biographer towards his personage. Here I cannot qualify, since I had an affection for Aleck Woollcott, often admiring, sometimes complicated with shudders. Stewart Edward White quotes a long-dead crony of his to this effect: "We love our friends not because of but in spite of." That wise tolerance expresses the allowances which his companions made for Woollcott. He was often difficult and always unpredictable; and "the nobleness that lies, sleeping but never dead," in the human soul was so encrusted in Aleck's harshness or levity as to be too often indiscernible except by his chosen intimates.

To this group I never belonged. My acquaintance with him was, for many years, of the most casual kind. Early in his career I was able to do him a favour which, I am sure, he never held against me. The nature of our friendship, which developed many years later, is difficult to make



clear to anyone who does not understand the unique tie uniting in a common interest and fellowship the graduates of a small, old, tradition-fostering college such as Aleck's and my Hamilton. Incidentally, he was more a respecter of tradition than of persons. As an earlier graduate I was still to him one of the Elder Statesmen even after he had become far more conspicuous in the literary world than I, irrevocably endowed with the peculiar prestige of the Old Alumnus. Thus I was exempt from his tantrums. I saw him at his best.

Many men and women knew him better than I. A few of them have refused to discuss him out of sadness, rancour, or reluctance to pass judgment. One who had once been his fond and valued friend writes to me:

"I want no part of Woollcott, dead or alive. Sorry."

And another, "Selah to you in your efforts to make a man out of a mouse."

A correspondent pleads, "Be kind to him. He was so kind, himself, to so many who needed his kindness."

The victim of some unspecified offence thus unburdens his soul:

"If there is a hell for important people who are causelessly cruel to the helpless and unimportant, I hope he is there."

And a woman who never saw him makes this appeal: "I have read his words. I have listened to his voice over the radio. He must have been misunderstood by his detractors. He *must*. I know that his was a gentle heart. Deal gently with him."

One of his most loyal and discerning friends, who has read the manuscript of this book, believes that I have dealt not gently but harshly.

"I am not sure that you intended to produce a most unpleasant character, vulgar, selfish, and exhibitionistic. Woollcott was a better person than you make him." And he goes on to ask challengingly how, if Woollcott were as pictured, he could have won and held the firm friendship of "so many people of talent and taste."

This is here noted for what it is worth. It seems to me worth much as counter-commentary.

Had he lived, Woollcott might have written (he certainly meant to write) an autobiography to be published posthumously. The world is the poorer in that he did not find time to carry out his design. Since he had few secrets and no reticences, he might well have produced a luminous document. We may be sure that it would have been no *Apologia pro vita sua*; more probably, a jovial defiance to friends and foes alike

to take him at his own estimate, which was boastfully unfavourable. For, by word, act, and pen, this singular character, in some phases of emotional intensity, would, like the encircled scorpion, turn his poison in upon himself. *Worst Foot Forward* might have been an appropriate title for his book. Asked to correct a character sketch of himself which did not err on the side of flattery, he passed it for publication with the comment:

"If the whole truth were here presented as I, myself, know it, the impression would be less favourable. I have on my conscience certain sins of omission which the years do not efface and for which I expect to pay in hell. They were the result of indolence, contemptible cowardice, and blackhearted selfishness."

How much of this was inverted egotism, how much the bitter reaction against his maladjustment to the normal world of men, I shall not attempt to determine. In spite of prosperity, public acclaim, and the devotion of a notable circle of friends, he never knew the time—this by his own considered affirmation—when life seemed to him worth living. It is diagnostic, I believe, that in adult years he could seldom endure solitude and his own thoughts. Yet I am satisfied, after a reasonably exhaustive consultation with those nearest him, that, notwithstanding his vehement *mea culpa*, there was no reason for accusations of conscience beyond the average experience.

A legend of suburban Philadelphia survives concerning a children's party at which the ten-year-old Woolcott was a guest. Slips of paper were passed about and each child was invited to write thereon his or her fondest ambition. There were the usual responses of soldier, sailor, world's heavyweight champion, actress, reigning beauty, and duchess. Young Aleck's contribution was:

"I would rather be a Fabbulous Monster."

Whether or not the story is apocryphal, some such ambition did, in fact, guide and mould his career. Much of what was grotesque and sometimes forbidding in his attitude towards the world, public and private, must be viewed in the light of this naïve slant. He overworked the role. The man beneath was finer than were the trappings of his deliberate eccentricities.

In essence, the best-intentioned effort at interpretation of personality can be little more than a majority opinion tempered by a minority report. A heavy overbalance of opinions about Alexander Woolcott is adverse, and this for a reason readily explicable. It is unfortunate,

perhaps unfair, certainly inevitable, that a man is judged not on how he faces the rare and heroic emergency, but on how he conducts his business of daily living and association. It is in the small affairs of life that he makes his contacts with others and his impress upon them. In this small commerce of existence Alexander Woolcott could be unconscionably petty, irascible, impatient, offensive, and inconsistent. Important issues—"the eternal verities," as he saw them—he met with balanced temper, a fine conviction, inflexible courage and principle. But this phase of his personality he doggedly guarded from view.

"His quarrelsome and unwholesome tongue was a foil to his good deeds, which were many and which he jealously kept secret while painstakingly publicizing his vices," wrote an associate who had good reason for disliking him.

Many of those who were fond of him will hold, with the critic whom I have quoted on page 10, that I have been less than just in my portraiture. It may be so. It may be that I have leaned over backward in my attempt not to be influenced by my personal liking. There is another influence to which I may as well confess. Throughout my task I have been conscious of a disembodied grin, like that of the fabled Chessy cat, hovering above my worktable; and emanating from it the admonition in Aleck's precise and caustic tones:

"God help you, Sam, if you prettify me!"

Widewaters

Auburn, N.Y.

*November, 1944*

## THE PHALANX

MIDWAY of the nineteenth century, America was inspired to save the world. The young republic, having settled its own problems to its satisfaction, yearned to expand its blessings to less advanced nations. Religious and social cults flourished. Signposts to salvation stood at every intellectual crossroad. Emerson wrote to Carlyle:

"We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform; not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket."

Longest-lived of the non-religious foundations was a Fourierist enterprise long since vanished from the records and leaving hardly a trace in the encyclopædias or standard histories, although it outlasted its famous contemporary, Brook Farm, two to one in years. Notable names were connected with the Phalanstere: Albert Brisbane, father of Arthur Brisbane and the original American apostle of Fourierism; Horace Greeley, an active member and contributor; Charles A. Dana and Park Benjamin, sympathetic visitors, and that pious and prolific lady novelist, Maria Child.

Collecting \$7,000, the group of nearly one hundred and fifty original members bought seven hundred acres of farm-land in a peaceful, lovely, and malarious vale five miles from Red Bank, New Jersey, where they established a farm and canning factory. Because their products were of the finest quality, the project was an industrial success for twelve years, 1843-55. The business and executive leaders of the community were the Bucklin family, of sound New England stock.

Made up of Unitarians, Universalists, Congregationalists, Jews, Presbyterians, Quakers, Shakers, Swedenborgians, and a considerable leavening of agnostics, the Phalanstere found for a time a common denominator in the lofty, if misty, Fourierist theses, "The Series Distributes the Harmonies" and "Attractions Are Proportional to Destinies." More concretely it stood for "Joint-Stock Property, Co-operative Labour, Equitable Distribution of Profits, Mutual Guarantees, Association of Families, Honours according to Usefulness, Integral Education, Unity of Interests."

It expressed in its publications frank disapproval of the political and social setup of the day, "its ill-requited and degrading system of in-

dustry," the "envious strife and anarchy in Trade and Industry," its "anarchist Commerce," "its menial system of Hired Labour," "its defective Education," and "its system of separate or isolated Households." "Our evils are social, not political, and a social reform only can eradicate them." All these defects were to be excluded from the seven-hundred-acre Utopia in the vale.

Tradition of the region ascribes the beginning of the débâcle to the garbage collectors. Although all labour was officially declared equally honourable, these "snappers-up of unconsidered trifles" deemed their assigned occupation socially detrimental. The matter was adjusted. Other revolts broke out. A fire destroyed the factory. Some of the younger spirits were for selling out and moving nearer to railhead. There was dissension. The communal ship staggered and heeled over dangerously, but resumed its course on an even keel, thanks largely to the authority of the President, John S. Bucklin, Alexander Woolcott's grandfather. Desertions followed. The inevitable individualistic reaction against communal regimentation undermined the project to the point where it collapsed, and the commercial salvage of the wreck, taken over by Grandfather Bucklin, became "J. & S. Bucklin, Choice Canned Goods."

Frances Bucklin, daughter of John S. and mother of Alexander, was born in the heyday of Phalansterism in 1847. Children of the Phalanx in her day were not permitted to suffer the "defective education" of the district school but were trained to their peculiar duties and responsibilities by Phalansterians specially deputed to that branch. "Bani," as she was called, grew up to a placid, sceptical, and unambitious girlhood. Where and how she met London-born Walter Woolcott is lost to family record.

Meet him she did and marry him, to the covert disapproval of the Bucklin clan. Five children were born to the couple, Harry, Julia, William, Philip, and Alexander. Frances Woolcott led a rootless life, at times following her migratory husband from job to job; more often taking refuge in the Phalanx for her childbearing. She was fortunate to have such a haven, for in that period the Woolcott fortunes were attenuated and Woolcott père was an absentee father and casual husband whose visits to the Jersey dale were, as one of the disgruntled Bucklins observed, "chiefly for breeding purposes."

In that environment and with the tradition of its sociopolitical ideals still strongly impregnating the tribal atmosphere, Alexander Woolcott

was born on January 19, 1887. The final Woolcott offspring was an unwanted child. His advent met with general disapproval. All that day Aunt Julie Bucklin gloomed over her household chores and, when the mother, a Dickens addict, sent out word from the birthroom, "a young gentleman has arrived whose name is Mr. Guppy," flounced forth from the house in resentful tears. Aunt Anne, the strong-minded female of the Bucklin clan, declared it "a scandal and a calamity." The three brothers of the newborn were in no more welcoming mood; even Julie, the gentle sister, regarded the event as far from blessed. Only the forty-year-old mother rejoiced.

That year of 1887 found the Phalanx little altered from its original form and thought. Exact figures are not available, but the community numbered probably between fifty and sixty, mostly connected by ties of blood or marriage. The eighty-five-room common house had long since lost its paint, but stood, solid and gaunt (as it still stands), and with a striking resemblance to an elongated Currier & Ives Noah's Ark. Four cottages clustered about it. Across lawn and garden rose the rebuilt cannery. The most distinguished product of the establishment was to describe the main building as "a shabby, rambling old caravansary . . . bleak as a skull in winter. . . . But, in the spring, the vines that encase it and hold it up against the sun break into myriad blossoms. In May it is fantastically festooned with wistaria and where their lavender petals flutter down to the eaves of the verandah roof, the crimson Rambler takes up the task of making the old house seem gay and important."

Though the Phalanx, as a political and social experiment, had been dead for thirty years, its principles and ethics still controlled the family life of the Bucklins and of the friends and associates whom they gathered about them. They were a people apart from their environment, by no means unfriendly, but resolutely independent. They educated their young in their own schools, by what strange methods and to what subversive creeds were matter for hostile conjecture in the neighbourhood. While not anti-religious, they practised no churchly rites. They were known to hold heretical views on accepted business and financial standards. The men were perhaps "socialists" or "anarchists," the terms being interchangeable in the 1880's as applied to any who discredited the sacredness of property rights. That stark and commodious building, unimproved since before the Civil War, which housed so many families, connoted something unusual and therefore presump-

tively malefic to the trite New Jersey mind. The whole business was—damnatory adjective—*queer*. There were local mutterings of atheism, immorality, revolutionary schemes. *The New York Times* surmised (correctly) that Grandmother Bucklin and her associates wore pantallets, and hinted (incorrectly) that they practised free love.

“Cranks” was the mildest term applied to them in the neighbourhood. Theirs was the sort of crankism, incomprehensible to the rural New Jersey mind, whereby our American civilization has made its difficult and experimental advances, painfully discarding the error and holding to a precious modicum of the good. The Phalansterians were peaceable, happy, self-sufficing, honourable to their obligations, law-abiding, and good citizens. Pauperism was unknown, as were lawsuits, crime, and scandal except such as was generated in the poison glands of local gossip. The standard of education was high; the death and sickness rate low. The community asked only to be left in peace to make its own living and mind its own affairs. Therefore it was suspect. The infant Woollcott was born under a cloud, albeit somewhat tenuous, of intolerance and, if not ostracism, at least distrust.

Events and people of those early years were sharply etched upon the precocious memory of “Mr. Guppy.” To him the familiars of the Phalanx were of giant proportions, “every one . . . as vivid as any of the characters in Dickens.” The older relatives were, so to speak, held in common by all the juniors, the blood-aunt of one being the courtesy-aunt of all. There was Grandpa Bucklin, a stern old gentleman full of puritanical precepts for the young, who, at the age of eighty-eight, would stride out upon his porch, an awesome figure in a bathrobe, and address withering remarks to the predatory chickens among his hollyhocks. His wife, who was a Boston Scars, had the “gift of hands” and could pluck out a headache by the roots of pain, dispersing it in the air with an electrical crackle of finger-tips. Woodland creatures came to her call, and enraged animals were checked and appeased by her calm commands. Though an invalid in her latter days, she was a “clever manager” who clasped one unsatisfied ambition to her housewifely soul, a piano for her musical-minded daughter. Laying by a dollar here, a dollar there, she would accumulate a promising hoard only to have her little fund diverted to some such recurrent and infestive necessity as a carload of fertilizer or a new silo.

There was Aunt Anne, relict of William Bucklin, a matriarch so imperious that the future insatiable chronicler of childhood recollec-

tions dared not point a pen towards the history of the Phalanx until she was safely dead. Uncle William had been, in his time, dowered with a combination of artistic temperament and wanderlust. He strolled happily across the map, painting desert expanses, California ranges, and Florida waterfront; but his inner eye was haunted by the mild verdure of his home, and somewhere in every picture, through cactus, cypress, or palm, the tall beeches of Jersey pricked up into the alien sky. At the end, returning to take charge, he lay on his back in the orchard and played the violin while the Choice Canned Goods business sloped gently down into bankruptcy. If anyone could have checked the débâcle, it might have been Aunt Julie, who was a born executive and roundly bossed the younger generation. It was she who acted as midwife when professional aid was inaccessible (she "birthed" five babies in one year), laid out courses of instruction, conducted funerals, and was, broadly speaking, the ceremonial chief of the clan. When she desired the attendance of her retainers, she tooted upon a horn, and was therefore called Gabriel.

Less definite figures impinged upon the consciousness of the newest Phalansterian, such as Aunt Mary, fragile and loving, who died of a decline, having been for a time treated by a young French émigré visiting at the Phalanx, Dr. Georges Clemenceau: also a courtesy-cousin, Olive, dim and lovely, who heard voices and was pursued by amorous shades.

All these and many collaterals, young and old, lived in a happy companionship, generally amicable, often mirthful, and sometimes economically straitened. Alexander Woolcott wrote of them:

"Here was a threadbare and unambitious family, no member of which had ever thought before my time of going to college, and many of which had never even been to school, who nevertheless took in the *Atlantic* when they couldn't pay their coal bill, knew their Trollope and Jane Austen by heart, and could speak French to Pasteur more readily than any boy coming out of Harvard."

The picture of poverty is overdrawn. Doubtless there were periods of financial ebb. Before one Christmas the household young were warned that there would be no gifts to hang on the tree—a false alarm, as it turned out. But the family could afford to have the expensive and fashionable Dr. S. Weir Mitchell down from Philadelphia to attend young Aunt Mary and old Grandmother Bucklin, and when Edward was bitten by a supposedly rabid dog, money was found for his passage



to Paris that he might be treated by no less a personage than Louis Pasteur.

If it was not the conventionally correct environment for the infant Woollcott, at least it surrounded him with affection, high principles, laughter, good will, and an emphasis upon the things of the spirit rather than of the body. Here he spent the earliest years of life, a cherished baby in spite of his undesired entry upon the scene, for he was delicately pretty, with a large head, well-modelled features, tiny hands and feet, and a precocious intelligence.

Christenings were taboo, as an expression of formal religion. The boy was named Alexander Humphreys, after the public-utilities expert who was later to become the millionaire president of Stevens Institute, and whose wife, born Eva Gallaudet, was Frances Woollcott's closest friend. What was presumably young Alexander Woollcott's earliest acquaintance with the Improving Literature of the Victorian Era, he owed to one of his aunts, probably Aunt Anne. Under her tutelage he learned at the age of two and a half to lisp the numbers of an old but still popular quatrain:

Tobacco is a filthy weed,  
It was the Devil sowed the seed,  
It drains your pockets, scents your clothes,  
And makes a chimney of your nose.

Fifty years later, the admonitory aunt's grandnephew was extolling over the air the virtue of a pipe tobacco, at a weekly stipend that would have supported the Phalanx and all its dependents for six months.

The principles, practices, and social status of the Phalanx powerfully affected Alexander Woollcott's character, particularly upon the emotional side. He breathed in nonconformity with the soft air of his first habitat. Throughout his life he was a hot and often unreasoning partisan of the underdog, a passionate supporter of minority rights, a devoted crusader for free speech and independent thought. The great eighty-five-room Phalanstery, with its humming domesticity by day and the promise of hospitality and fellowship in its lighted windows by night, impressed the receptive infant mind as the true design for living.

It took a curious twist in his development. All his adult life he aspired to keep an inn.

## THE INFANT PHENOMENON

BACHELOR circles of Kansas City were enriched in the summer of 1889 by the advent of an impressive alien. Through the procurement of the influential Alexander Humphreys, Mr. Walter Woolcott had come from the East to become secretary of the Kansas City Gas, Light & Coke Company. His English accent, his natty dress, his skill at cards, and his nice taste in cocktails so commended him to the nabobs of the Kansas City Club that they waived the customary period of probation and admitted him at once. He took up quarters at a fashionable boarding-house kept by a reduced but undecayed gentlewoman known as "the beautiful Mrs. Elliott." Before long, comments upon his exact status in the establishment were embellished with winks and smiles.

Kansas City was enjoying a stockyard boom which had carried its population well above the hundred thousand. There was a splurge of new architecture, largely of the dull, unimaginative brick-barracks type, copied from the model of overcrowded Eastern metropolises without excuse for such spatial economy. Aldine Place, a two-block dead end no longer in existence, was typical of the expansion. Feminine society fluttered when it became known that Mr. Woolcott was negotiating for a residence there. Though upwards of forty, he was still a sprightly beau, a definite prospect in the marriage market. What did his prospective housekeeping portend?

The answer was supplied by an unsuspected Mrs. Woolcott disembarking from the train with five children. They settled placidly into that block which was locally known as "Sash-curtain Row" from the propensity of the housewives to vie with one another in China-silk window drapes. In morose reminiscence, Alexander stigmatized the locality as "that grimy cul-de-sac." This is less than fair. Though the brick edifices formed an unbroken line, wall to wall, there were pleasant porches with vines, greenery in front yards, and plenty of space in the rear. None but the prosperous could afford to live there. Many of the residents were "carriage folks." One family boasted a tandem. There were three telephones in the block, and the homes were heated by the first central steam plant in the city.

All of Aleck's impressions of the period are "slightly overcast by clouds of financial anxiety." It is difficult to understand why. The head of the family had a salary of \$250 a month. He at once found or made places in the company offices for Son Harry and Daughter Julie at \$125 and \$75 respectively. A young man lodger added his monthly \$25 to the budget. At \$5,700 a year in those days, a family could live more than comfortably.

Culture flourished in Sash-curtain Row. Across the street lived Roswell M. Field, dramatic critic and conductor of "The Fault Finder" column in *The Star*. He once celebrated the locality in a poem, "The House on Aldine Place," which was favourably regarded by the neighbours. A few doors down, Judge Delbert Haff, a rising young intellectual, interpreted Emerson's essays to palpitating débutantes. The popular pastimes were directed to mental stimulus; young and old played at twenty questions, authors, and anagrams. It was the era of what Viola Roseboro', a contemporary wit, mordantly termed "the Aspiring Weakminded."

By taste and equipment, Woollcott senior might have been a prominent participant in these improving causeries, since he was widely read, wrote and spoke French fluently, and displayed a critical knowledge of Shakespeare. He banned himself, however, by iconoclastic pronouncements upon Holy Writ. Nobody in those days who failed to subscribe to the literal interpretation of the Scriptures was a safe associate for women and children. His exclusion from the cultural exchange did not worry him. He preferred the whist room of the club.

The Kansas City life of the Woollcotts appears to have been happy. Mrs. Woollcott was a homemaker and, in her quiet way, a friend-maker. Harry, the eldest child, a pale, handsome youth nearly eighteen years Aleck's senior, who vamped on the piccolo banjo, was already well established in business. Julie, pretty, spirited, and intelligent, quickly accumulated a circle of girl friends and men admirers. The two boys, William and Philip, were making satisfactory records at school. All of them adored their mother and all but Aleck liked their father, whom they regarded as an amusing, if somewhat irresponsible, crony.

Why Aleck should have been a standout in this particular is not clear. He had a passionate fondness for Julie, who had assumed the duty of bringing him up on, the ground that Mrs. Woollcott was too old-fashioned in her ideas to raise a boy; and had only a little less affection

for his mother. But for his father he conceived and maintained a dogged distaste. When the head of the family passed around the breakfast table, bestowing the morning kiss upon his offspring, Aleck would slyly thrust an upright fork above his ear in the fond hope of puncturing the paternal jowl.

The dislike was not reciprocated. Walter Woolcott was carelessly interested in and amused by his youngest. He would recite classical passages to him and, while the boy was still very young, so thoroughly imbued him with the principles and strategy of cribbage that the game remained a source of permanent profit to Aleck.

Young Aleck's early companions were of the neighbourhood; his intimates, the three children of the Dan Lasts; "Grave Gertrude, and Methodist Martha, and Sarah with Toothless Gums," as "Rose" Field celebrated them in one of his glib parodies. There were also the Field terriers, Askem and Guessem. The boy long remembered with awe a visit from Eugene Field (locally known as "our R. M.'s cousin"), whose poetry was paid for by magazines in dignified covers.

It was "R. M." who took the child to his first theatre. The play was the spectacular *Sinbad the Sailor*. It was a highlight of the six-year-old's childhood. He announced to Julie his intention of going to every matinée in town thenceforth. She dashed that bright hope.

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"Theatre tickets cost money."

"Mr. Field goes whenever he feels like it."

"Mr. Field is a critic."

"What's that?"

"He writes about plays for the paper. He gets his tickets for nothing."

"Because he writes for the papers?"

"Ycs."

"I'm going to write for the papers," asserted Aleck.

Two years later he began his literary career with a sketch, "The Adventures of a Shopping Bag," which he requested Roswell Field to sponsor. Submitted to several of the children's magazines which then flourished, it met with unanimous rejection. The young author was saddened but not discouraged. He still intended to write for publication.

Already the embryo grammarian was cropping out. There is on record a desperate expostulation from Julie:

"Don't you talk to *me* about nouns, Aleck Woollcott. I don't know what a noun is and I don't want to!"

Next door to the Woollcotts lived the Christie family, prosperous and prominent in Kansas City circles. One of the daughters, Lucy, a local beauty, was a contemporary and close friend of Julie Woollcott. The two girls took charge of the delicate and precocious boy, petted and made much of him, sheltered him from the rougher contacts of boyhood. While other youngsters were playing tipcat or prisoner's base, he would spend afternoons with Lucy and Julie, fussing with ribbons and fabrics, dressing up and posing before the mirror in his first manifestation of stage-struckness. They cast him as Puck in the neighbourhood *tableaux vivantes*. He never forgot that early success!

Another feminine influence was that of Sophie Rosenberger, his first public-school teacher. She was quick to diagnose in her small pupil a mind of unusual promise. Schoolmates recall, perhaps with a residue of childish jealousy, that while Miss Rosenberger was a conscientious instructress to all her classes, she evinced individual interest for one scholar only. She directed Aleck's reading; first, Louisa M. Alcott, then, when he had reached the advanced age of eight, selected portions of Dickens. Thence he branched off for himself into more perilous paths. After he had appeared in a *tableau vivant* as one of the little Vignards, his teacher was shocked to find him immersed in that rakish and enormously popular novel, *Trilby*. Throughout his life he preserved a devotion to the Du Maurier masterpiece, as well as to Dickens and Alcott. There is inherent evidence that Miss Alcott's gentle works influenced his later sentimental tendencies, if not his style; and a friend of his adult years, Howard Dietz, got a rueful grin out of him by slyly characterizing him as Louisa M. Woollcott.

So devoted to school and teacher did young Aleck become that he once resisted that most powerful of temptations, another invitation from "Rose" Field to go to a show, because he had been appointed monitor for the day. There is reason to believe that, in surmising himself to have been "that lowest form of animal life, a teacher's pet," Aleck was right. The later relationship, however, was on a manly enough basis. On his forty-ninth birthday he received from his retired instructress a gift which inspired him to the exultant observation that "when you can get a birthday present of a quart of whisky from your eighty-year-old schoolteacher, you'll be a man, my son!"

Across the years and the miles he saw little of the two Kansas City

women whom he had taken to his childish heart. He never relaxed his affection for them. Lucy Christie married and went to England to live. He cherished her in thought as "one of the wonder-people of our life," wrote her with loyal regularity, and when his death seemed imminent (she had meantime returned to Kansas City) asked her to come to him, which she did. A late letter to "Dear Teacher" (Miss Rosenberger) ended: "This leaves only one of your questions unanswered. Do I love you? Yes; I do, indeed." He begged her to live one year so that he might come out and celebrate with her the fiftieth anniversary of his admittance to her class, and, himself, died six months short of the goal. To Thornton Wilder, one of his later intimates, he animadverted wistfully upon this. Why was it, he speculated, that childhood friends who no longer held any special significance in his life and with whom he was seldom in communication should lay hold upon his affections with a tenacity and power not accorded to "any such newcomer as you." It must be weakness of character!

That peculiar loyalty was a keystone of his existence. Among the multitudinous feuds and enthusiastic quarrels of his career, not one was with a friend of early years.

His predisposition to feminine society was a phase which passed. In due time he took to the sidewalks. If he never attained much skill in these casual athletics, it was not for lack of trying. He became a determined and daring pavement skater. William Woollcott remembers:

There was talk of sending my mother a round robin asking her to keep him off roller skates because of his habit of leaping so far backwards that only the back wheels were on the ground. The fear that he would fall and crack his skull didn't make for a tranquil evening for the Aldine Placers sitting on their front steps. Nothing was done about it and he didn't crack his skull.

Walter Woollcott lost his job when the Light & Coke Company changed control. His six-year tenure was the longest in a changeful record. An able executive, he was popular with the underlings, but frequently in hot water with his superiors, towards whom he was cantankerous and even insubordinate.

The family packed up, bade their friends farewell, and returned to the sure refuge of the Phalanx. It was the first of many such homeward flights. William, already developing as the dependable business man of the clan, had preceded the others by two years and had a good job in the cannery. With that insouciance which characterized his attitude

towards his dependents, Woollcott *père* vanished somewhere into the commercial void, remitting an occasional and notably insufficient dribble of cash. Upon William's youthful but capable shoulders devolved, for the time, the burden of finding money for the family's basic needs.

Since, after the departure from Kansas City, the family group was never again to be together, and since, as an entity, it was to exercise a negligible influence upon Aleck's career, the members may be briefly considered here. Of the Woollcott boys he cared only for William, the "Billy" of his childish letters signed "Your favourite brother, Aleck." "I have always liked him, which is more than I can say of my other brothers," he wrote to me late in his life. Up to the time of her death, Julie was the constant element in his affections, living with and looking after him part of the time before her brief and happy marriage. To her he gave an unswerving devotion. When they buried her at the Phalanx she remained in his memory as "perfume now scattered on the grass." To his mother he was a loyal and affectionate son and an ungrudging aid, but he had no illusions about her. He said despairingly to a college mate: "I am the child of an insane father and a dear but doting mother."

Harry, the oldest of Aleck's generation, continued in public-utility work, holding minor executive positions with moderate success. Twice, of record, he crossed his junior's orbit. The first time was in Paris, where Sergeant Woollcott was working on *Stars and Stripes*. Harry, who was too old for the active services, had gone abroad as a Y.M.C.A. worker. Meeting by chance, the brothers spent a festive and friendly evening in the bistros of the Left Bank. But when Harry was recalled, Aleck did not trouble to see him off at the station. Some years later he dropped in upon Aleck at *The Times* office and was favourably impressed by the glamour of the Rialto, in which the play reviewer was now a conspicuous and weighty figure. A trifle bored, Aleck nevertheless took the other to first nights and introduced him to the fascinations of back-stage life. It struck Harry as being far more interesting than helping to run a small city trolley system. He announced his intention of quitting the public-utility field and becoming forthwith a dramatic critic. Aleck's dissuasions were so vehement that the brothers parted on poor terms. After Harry's death, however, Aleck made generous gifts to his widow. Family ties meant little to him, but family responsibilities he accepted instinctively and, as far as might be, secretly.

Phil, next older than the belated Aleck, makes one shining entry

upon the scene. At the time of publication of *While Rome Burns*, he was living quietly at Red Bank, N.J., a few miles from the Phalanx. The book surged into instant acclaim and success. At the Elks Club the report spread that the pleasant-faced, reserved gentleman who was occasionally invited in by some member for a quiet drink was the author. The bookshops for miles around were depleted of copies in no time. Commuters returned, laden, from New York. All day long the modest and slightly mysterious guest sat in the Elks Club, amiably scrawling "Woollcott" across proffered title pages and accepting toasts and congratulations. Those volumes are still cherished in the countryside.

Phil, who like his eldest brother followed the paternal footsteps into the public-utility field, is now retired and living in Florida. Between him and Aleck there was a mutual feeling of cheerful indifference.

One curious note remains to be entered on the family record. In the new edition of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, William Woollcott, a Baltimore glue-maker, has three entries to two for his famous brother.

### 3

## GROWING PAINS

ALEXANDER was eight years old when he returned to his birthplace. Little by little, the community traditions were relaxing. The Phalanx young were no longer specially educated at home; the Woollcotts trudged their daily two miles in all weather to and from the district school, taking turns at doing the janitor work of the premises. Whatever training young Aleck may have derived from the constituted authorities was of less profit to him than his browsings in the varied and unorthodox Phalanstere library. In this year, and subsequent vacations when he was at school elsewhere, he so saturated himself in the printed word that at the age of twelve he lamented having no more books to conquer; he had read them all.

Besides reading, the other passion of his young life was conversation. While Grandfather Bucklin, who died that year of 1895, was alive, his austere precept that children should be seen and not heard kept the



output unhappily repressed. Upon his death Aleck burst forth in a spate of verbiage. He had no hesitancy in monopolizing the table talk. His admiring mother did nothing to discourage the persistent loquacity, and the rest of the family soon lapsed into a state of resigned endurance.

"It was almost impossible to head him off," said Aunt Anne, who made repeated and conscientious efforts.

Though even in those fledgling days a one-way talker, he could appreciate the art in another. He returned one day from a railway trip to report:

"Oh, Mother! I met on the train an individual with the most remarkable conversational ability."

The colloquy had developed, it appeared, from Aleck's having asked the stranger his opinion as to the relative merits of *The Forum* and *The Atlantic*.

Here, as in Kansas City, a pet among the womenfolk, he was not popular with his youthful fellows. When they organized baseball, he stayed at home to play croquet. They took him fishing for bullheads in Trout Brook and he carried along a hat to trim. If a project arose to go bird's-nesting or to play pirate, he preferred to sit in the cottage, pasting cutouts in an album or ornamenting picture-frames. Naturally he became the victim of juvenile horseplay and might frequently be seen, beleaguered in a tree like a harried woodchuck, awaiting rescue by sturdy Brother Billy. He bore his oppressions uncomplainingly.

Perhaps because Walter Woollcott now held a precarious job with the United Gas Improvement Company of Philadelphia—thanks again to Alexander Humphreys—there was a project to move the family to that city. It came to no more than Mrs. Woollcott's taking her youngest to Germantown, putting him in the Germantown Combined Grammar School, and finding lodgings in a modest house on Morton Street.

At school Aleck formed a friendship with a classmate of his own age, George Smyser Agnew. The Agnews were well-to-do, friendly people whose house was made a second home to the boarding-house boy. Smyser became the one and only crony of that lonely boyhood. From the outset he harboured the conviction that Alexander Woollcott was to become a known name, its bearer destined to an important place in the great world. In that faith he religiously preserved every scrap of Woollcottiana; letters, diaries, photographs, and school records. The last do not show Aleck to have exhibited unusual scholarship, though

the new pupil's own diary records that his class standing was "very gratifying." One entry reads:

"Every day now I bring an excuse and am allowed to stay in at recess. Then we have a good time." Other entries read, "Drew a little, read a little, and packed books. . . ." "Mounted pictures, went for flowers, and had lots of fun."

He puzzled his teachers by bursting into uncontrolled and inexplicable laughter in classroom, and alarmed his family by lurking on street corners in the romantic hope of getting himself kidnapped like Charley Ross, who had lived not far away. He took no interest in athletics. His teeth were bad, his eyes weak, and he had picked up malaria at Phalanx. He was a good deal of a mollycoddle and a bit of a prig. One of his more sympathetic instructors thought him pathetically conscious of being a misfit, and suspected the truth, that he was taking refuge in a self-created world of the imagination inspired by books and peopled by friendly phantoms. His life of reality was neither healthy nor happy.

One effect upon his character was to engender venom. As he grew older, he developed a knack of mimicry. He became an inveterate tease. Any physical peculiarity, a club foot, a strabismic eye, a stammering tongue, aroused the evil genius of caricature. At sight of a specially homely girl he would fall off his chair, cover his eyes, and writhe in histrionic agony. Though malicious, he was not cowardly, and would vent his spite against the world on the toughest bully as readily as on the feeblest weakling. Consequently he was in a fairly constant state of confusion. One such exploit won him a moral victory.

A big stupid lout of a schoolmate, stung beyond endurance by young Woollcott's wicked travesty of his squint, set out in pursuit, with the avowed intention of tearing his persecutor apart. Aleck, though puny, was fleet of foot; he had to be to survive. The chase was on, with the whole recess crowd anticipating the kill. The quarry led the pack across the playground and, with a lessening lead on his field, darted up a long flight of steps, with the avenger only a few yards behind. At the top he whirled and threw wide his arms.

"Stop!" he commanded in a voice between thunder and squeak. "Stop, or I shall reveal the secret of your shameful birth."

The pursuer stopped. His jaw fell. His eyes goggled. He stood there piteously muddled and indecisive, while his insulter, nose in air, minced away unscathed.

The first entry in the boyhood diary is curious and possibly significant:

Shakespeare

Circumcision

"Away, my friend! New Flight and happy newness that intends old flight."

This is followed by a passage in French composition.

Succeeding entries indicate a systematic spirit. The diarist made notes of the weather and entered all expenditures. At the Phalanx no pocket-money was allotted to the young. Now, Aleck had an allowance, though not a lavish one, as forty-four cents was his heaviest monthly outlay. "Bun . . . 1ct" is the most frequent item.

Passion for the stage, latent in the boy since his début as Puck, found satisfaction when the Ladies Auxiliary of the Germantown Y.M.C.A. ambitiously produced Palmer Cox's *The Brownies in Fairyland*, exploited in Gothic type on the programme as a FAEST FOR ALL. "Never before has an entertainment been offered to the public possessing such a peculiar fascination for both young and old."

Second in the Cast of Characters appears the name of Alexander Woolcott. He had the "fat" part of Cholly Boutonnière, the Brownie Exquisite, which, according to the legend, he rendered with grace and aplomb.

The professional stage was magic to his soul. He denied himself his penny buns to stand in queue for "nigger heaven," as the second gallery was then called. The diary notes his impressions of the current drama, his first incursion into theatrical criticism. They are consistently ecstatic. Nathan Hale's gallant end moved him to irrepressible sobs. Every actress was a goddess. The thrill of his school years came later when he made his professional début as a "super," supporting E. H. Sothern in *The Proud Prince*. Thereafter for weeks he strutted the boards of his hall bedroom, uttering lofty sentiments in an ambitious baritone.

Suddenly and inexplicably the Woolcotts were rich. Walter Woolcott had struck up a friendship with a stock-market plunger named Gibbs and, misinterpreting his fallible operations for a permanently reliable system, had followed his lead with temporary success. Aleck was plucked from the boarding-house; Mrs. Woolcott and Julie were summoned from Phalanx; a family transfer was effected to a mansion in fashionable West Walnut Lane, standing in spacious grounds with driveway and stables, though no horses. There a room was set aside for

Aleck's own; "very charming," notes the diary. A bicycle and a typewriter were added to his equipment.

Prosperity lasted little more than a year. The Gibbs formula went wrong, and the Woollcott fortunes melted. There was no money to pay interest on the mortgage; the elegant West Walnut Lane premises, with driveway and stables, must be abandoned. Inevitably the impoverished dependants were drawn back on the cbb tide of their adversity to the Phalanx, which was "the home for all of us, the year around, when in financial difficulties."

The whilom rich Mr. Woollcott found his subordinate job incommensurate with his expanded conception of what the world owed him. He resigned. A great ennui descended upon him. He said that he was tired. He went to bed with the avowed intention of staying there until rested. This he did for two years, part of the time being spent in a private institution. His subsequent course was of little interest and less importance to his family.

Once more Mrs. Woollcott sought asylum at the ever-sheltering Phalanx while the kind-hearted Agnews took in her son. But Aleck could not impose indefinitely upon their good nature. At the end of the summer Mrs. Agnew found a place for him in a boarding-house nearby, conducted by two eminently respectable spinsters. He was represented to them as the ideal boarder, living upon applesauce and a little milk; the landladies would make money on him.

At once a change came over him. Within a month he was manifesting so ravenous an appetite that the poor ladies besought Mrs. Agnew to send them no more such starvelings. Not from any evil intent but in a spirit of pure romanticism, Freshman Woollcott was to entertain his college mates a few years later with reminiscences of that innocent lodgment as the abode of professional bawdry wherein he played the piano for the wages of sin.

His actual employments were of a more blameless nature. He read at church sociables. He recited before afternoon gatherings of adoring females. His name appears upon the agenda of a Camera Club. He was much admired for parlour imitations, which he was never loath to render.

Grade schooldays were over. With his *fidus Achates*, Smyser Agnew, he entered the Central High School. He was no happier there than he had been in the academy; probably less so. He recalled the ensuing four years as the most wretched period of his life which he could hardly

speak of without bitterness. At an academic centenary he told his fellow graduates:

"It is a tradition of the old alumnus, tottering back to the scene of his schooldays, to speak with great affection of the school. I must be an exception here to-night. During the four years that I attended Central High School I had a lousy time. . . . I was something of an Ishmaelite among the students."

Nevertheless, the school was good for him. It was the only cultural high school in Philadelphia and drew its pupils from all sections. There were men of marked ability on the faculty: Edgar Smythe, a Shakespearean and Jane Austen scholar; Duncan Spaeth, whose speciality was old English; Ernest Lacey, who wrote plays in verse and was therefore a demigod to young Aleck; and Franklin Spencer Edmonds, an imaginative and inspirational teacher of economics. The already maturing mind of the boy was able to absorb much of what they had to give.

From his fellow students he got little but lessons in endurance and self-control. In a class notable for its solidarity—it maintains constant intercorrespondence forty years after graduation and holds frequent reunions, none of which Woolcott ever attended—he was a being apart. Smyser Agnew was his one friend. Richardson Wright, editor of *House and Garden*, remembers of him only his nickname, "Cream Puff," while Aleck's memory of Wright centred upon muddy boots which Wright used to wipe upon his (Aleck's) overcoat when sitting behind him in class. Izzie Leopold, destined to fame as Ed Wynn, would probably never have recalled his inconspicuous classmate had not their paths later converged on Broadway.

Few of the class had bookish tastes. Towards that small group Aleck gravitated, though no close friendships came of it. There was a casual community of interest between him and one of them, Harry Scherman, later the founder and president of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Scherman had published in the school paper some dialogues in the manner of "Mr. Dooley" which he now recalls as dismal beyond the generality of schoolboy imitations. To Aleck they were masterpieces. Whether or not he tried out contributions in a similar vein Scherman does not know, but there is no doubt that this was the measure of his aspirations. His mind was mature and essayish, but his taste was for rampant humour.

He contrived his own outlet for it. On his new typewriter he turned

out a publication, reproduced by mimeograph, which he called *The Garter*. The genesis of the title was this: For the forty-five-minute trip from Germantown to the Central High School, Aleck, Smyser Agnew, and other boys took the "218 block car," on which there was always a delegation of young misses going to the Girls' High School at 17th and Spring Garden streets. One morning a girl named Jessie Phillips dropped her garter. At this excruciatingly humorous mishap, Aleck rolled and shrieked with glee. Next day the first number of *The Garter* appeared, headed by a poem beginning:

Why does Jessie pause just now,  
Looking like a martyr?  
Oh, I blush to tell you why!  
The dear has lost her garter.

Instead of adopting the popular course of lampooning the faculty, *The Garter* pointed its editorial shafts at the students, and particularly their inamoratas. Each issue was sold out as soon as it appeared; but it did nothing to improve the social status of the editor. A grossly illustrated poem, celebrating in derisory terms the dubious charm of a fair one, got him a licking from the maligned maiden's brother.

*The Mirror*, official organ of the school, received no contributions from him. His one brief moment of recognition came in his senior year when he wrote a Romeo-and-Juliet parody, which was produced by school talent, himself playing Juliet; the football coach covered him with glory by an approving word upon it.

*Silly Snippets* was his second venture in journalism. It was for home consumption and satirized his fellows in the boarding-house where he was then living. Like *The Garter*, it was a sell-out.

In so far as he achieved any notoriety among his fellows, it was as a butt. The typical urchinish persecutions which his peculiar physique and manners brought upon him were endured not with meekness, indeed, for he was brisk with verbal comebacks, but with good humour and unflinching pluck. Many a rise his tormentors got out of him; they never got a whimper.

He was reading ravenously, spending his spare hours in the Friends' Library. This institution issued free cards to applicants, but limited withdrawals of titles, so many per week per person. Young Woolcott found a way to circumvent that restriction. Professor Edmonds recalls that the lad made a periodical canvass of the entire boarding-house

where he was then quartered, soliciting library cards, down to the cook and domestics.

"On Saturday mornings he would go down Germantown Avenue to Market Square where the Friends' Library was located, with his express wagon, and there he would fill the wagon with books that he wanted and that were available for his use at that time. He was very appreciative."

His final scholastic appearance was sensational. Appointed to deliver a commencement recitation, he selected that passage from *The Cloister and the Hearth* where Gerard escapes on a silken cord from the window of the donjon keep, lowering himself dizzily (and recurrently) "down—down—down." The first two repetitions passed uneventfully, but the secret telegraph had been operative in the audience and his schoolmates were ready and waiting for the next time. The unconscious orator, warmed to his theme, continued:

"He passed a rusty, slimy streak on the wall; it was some ten feet long. The rope made his hands very hot. He stole a look up. The prison window was a good way off now. Down—down—down—down—"

The whole auditorium caught the theme on the beat. In joyous antiphony they thundered:

Down, down, DOWN where the Wurzburger  
Flows, flows, FLOWS,

And so on until the thwarted elocutionist was washed completely out in waves of harmony. Due to the chagrin of this contretemps, his academic pride and loyalty were so effectually quashed that he sold his gold medal, awarded as an essay prize, to a pawnbroker for \$3.40.

The keenest satisfaction derived from the prize was that he won it over Harry Scherman, whose success in the field of high comedy had roused his extravagant and envious admiration.

Shortly before their graduation, Aleck invited Scherman to his quarters. A small and shabby hall bedroom was littered with books. Thrusting upon his visitor a composite photograph of Broadway celebrities, Aleck said: "That's what I'm going to be."

As this peculiar form of picturization, popular at the time, consisted in the superimposition of one face after another upon the photographic plate—thirty or forty or fifty—the total being fondly supposed to represent something wonderful and significant in the way of an



BOY

*(Photographed by Richard Canver)*





FOR  
*Midsummer  
night's Dream*)

average, norm, type, mass character, or whatever the current term might be, Scherman was at a loss.

"Which?" he said, examining the list of notable names below.

"A dramatic critic," answered Aleck confidently.

The next time that Scherman saw him to speak to, Aleck was dramatic critic of *The New York Times*.

Had a choice of sex been offered him at the changing period of his life, he would probably have elected to be a girl. The feminizing influence of his associations was potent in his developing organism. His interests and amusements, apart from books, were girlish rather than boyish.

"In his early teens," writes one of his cousins, "he loved to dress up and pass himself off as a girl. Someone gave him a wig of beautiful brown hair, and he coaxed various bits of apparel from his sister, Julie, and her friends."

At the age of fourteen he attended a New Year's party, so successfully disguised in feminine finery, to which his slender form and delicate features lent verisimilitude, that hostess and guests accepted him, throughout the evening, as "a visiting young lady from Ohio." In charades and private theatricals he always chose female roles. He took to signing his letters "Alecia."

How significant this tendency was, how dangerously it might have developed, can be no more than a matter of surmise. When he was fifteen Aleck again found himself in a highly respectable boarding-house; not the place of his earlier sojourn. One of his fellow lodgers was a newly married young woman of twenty-two. She was attractive, and of the smouldering brunette type. A friendship developed between her and the shy and pretty boy. In the best tradition of modern Rabelaisianism, the husband was a travelling man.

The event conformed to the classic pattern. Unexpectedly returning from a trip, Mr. "Brown" (which was not his name) found young Mr. Woollcott with his wife. The visitor hopped nimbly from bed, but too late. His retreat was cut off. The husband rushed upon him and dealt him a cruel kick on the shin. Poor Aleck, with an ill-suppressed shriek, reached the door and hobbled down the hallway. The last thing he heard was his lady's rich voice, raised in reprobation of her husband's brutality.

In the morning there was a peremptory knock at the boy's door as he was dressing. Mr. Brown entered. Retreating behind the wash-

stand, Aleck prepared to emulate the cornered rat and sell his life as dearly as might be. There was no need. Mr. Brown had come not to wallow in blood, but to present his apologies. Reflecting gratefully that Mrs. Brown must be a lady of powerful persuasiveness, the young lover accepted the amende.

In the richly embroidered reminiscences of early depravity where-with he regaled his fellow collegians in later years, this episode was significantly omitted. Presumably he shrank from fact, while revelling in fiction. Smyser Agnew, in whom he confided, thinks that Aleck's reaction to the experience was shock and confusion of spirit. In any case, it relieved him of doubt upon one salient point—he was not a young girl but a young man.

About this same time he made his first remunerative essay at professional writing. He sent to *The Philadelphia Record* a review, probably of Roswell M. Field's collection of verse, since there is a letter of October 22, 1902, from Mr. Field, thanking him for "a very excellent review" and expressing surprise at his being "old enough to write for the newspapers." The surprise was on the reviewer's side when he received a cheque from the newspaper. That unexpected generosity filled the recipient with an enduring gratitude which bore fruit after many years. For those magazine editors who came to regard Alexander Woolcott—not without some justification—as a literary Shylock, this evidence is offered for the defence.

In 1942 Charles Lee, Literary Editor of the *Record*, wrote, asking him for a contribution to an anniversary number. Instead of ignoring or rejecting the solicitation, or citing his customary rate of \$1,000 or \$2,000 or whatever figure popped into his commercial consciousness at the moment, he spent an afternoon composing the article, with a self-reproachful side note that he must quit "this expensive business of being sentimental about the newspaper business."

"This makes \$5 that I got for the two pieces," he wrote Mr. Lee, adding pathetically, "and it is not enough."

From the *Record*, the budding journalist shifted to the *Telegraph*, where he had a cousin at court, Miss Helen W. Sears, who was in charge of the book page. After hours, the high-school pupil took to invading her workroom, where he pawed over the new volumes, selected those to his taste, and proffered an urgent request for them. The editor suggested a *quid pro quo*: Aleck might have the books if he would write reviews of them.

He was more than willing. At first his style was florid with schoolboy effusiveness. Miss Sears pruned severely.

"He fiercely resented my blue pencil," she recalls (what an echo this will start in the minds of many a present-day editor!), "but our differences of opinion were usually amicably settled by going out for a baked Alaska."

So well did he profit by her editing that before his graduation he was put in full charge of the literary page for three weeks while she was away with a sick father, and "filled the needs of the situation with great credit to himself and great satisfaction to me." No mean achievement for a stripling of barely seventeen.

Miss Sears saw him at his best. She has no memories of his caustic tongue, but recalls him as "a gay, happy, lively lad." Herein she differs from Professor Edmonds and other faculty members, upon whom he made an impression of withdrawal and maladjustment. The answer may be that he felt himself more at home among books than among boys.

A *Saturday Evening Post* serial by Charles Macomb Flandrau hit him hard at an impressionable time of life. Phalanx tradition was unfavourable to institutions of higher learning. Nevertheless, this offspring of the community was romantically fired by the gallant picture of life in academic shades, as set forth so alluringly in the Flandrau classic.

It was not to Harvard, however, that his excited ambition was directed, but to Hamilton, a small, old, sternly classical New York State institution. This came about through association with a young woman playwright, Ivy Ashton, who had had several plays produced on Broadway and who was a familiar of the Phalanx, being related to one of the families there. She had married Edwin B. Root, grandson of "Cube" Root, an early holder of the chair of mathematics at Hamilton, and son of "Square" Root, his successor. Elihu Root was of that family, being an uncle of Edwin's. Both Ned Root, who was a successful lawyer, and his dramatist wife became interested in young Woollcott. If he was bent on a literary career, the severely cultural Hamilton training would be just what he needed.

Aleck was easily convinced, but where was the money to come from? Through the potent Root influence it would be feasible to arrange a scholarship which would take care of most tuitional expenses. There remained the cost of maintenance. The Woollcott income was practically nil. Appeal was made to Alexander Humphreys, now President

of Stevens Institute at Hoboken. Mr. Humphreys arranged a loan of \$3,000. To his namesake he said curtly:

"If I never get this back, that's my loss. I've done it before. You needn't worry about it. You can return it if you like and if you're able, or you can pass it along to someone else."

Aleck paid every cent. When his benefactor refused to accept any interest, the debtor applied the Humphreys principle and, after his rise to success and affluence, made vicarious repayment time and again. Just how many young people he aided educationally will never be known. He was more than secretive; he was touchy on the subject of his private charities. Of one case in his own family it is known that he declined to consider repayment and echoed the Humphreys directions to "pass it along to someone else."

Graduated from the academy in 1905, he had the summer before him in which to improve his finances. He took a job at the Phalanx. An earlier essay as a field hand had resulted in his ploughing up a half-acre of corn which a fellow labourer had toilsomely sowed a few days before. This time he was transferred to the cannery, where an eye could be kept upon him.

As he settled into the mould of manhood, family and friends noted an inheritance, the mere mention of which had power to infuriate him. By a sardonic turn of the genetic fates, the youngest Woolcott was growing up to resemble not the mother he loved, the sister he adored, or the brother he admired, but the father he detested. Physically, mentally, and in temperament he was a chip of the old, bias-grained block.

He was eighteen years old when, clad in a cut-down suit of Ned Root's and proud in the prospect of being the first Phalanxer of his generation to go to college, he set out for the campus at Clinton, N.Y.

## 4

### THE SACRED GROVE

To the impressionable freshman of the class of 1909, the forested campus, high above the valley of the Oriskany, with its grave and ancient dignity of weathered-stone architecture, struck home with an

enduring sense of splendour. A quarter of a century after graduation he was vaunting himself in print as "an old grad of the most virulent type" and, as the Town Crier, sounding the praises of Alma Mater over the air waves:

It stands on a lovely hilltop near Clinton in the State of New York; stands in a noble park still marked out with the treaty stones of the Indians, placed there as a pledge of sanctuary when first the school was built. Men whose business takes them to all the universities, both of this country and Europe, have told me that, except for the University of Upsala in Sweden, the Hamilton campus is the most beautiful in the world.

For Alexander Woollcott, too, it was sanctuary. Throughout his life, he returned there periodically to refresh his spirit in the peace and beauty of the spot.

Two women of the Root family, daughters of Oren ("Square") Root, took him in hand. He could not have had a more propitious introduction to the pleasant and cultured little community on the hill. Alice Root (Mrs. Thomas F.) Nichols, wife of one of the younger faculty members, constituted herself his mentor, a role which in after life he never permitted her wholly to relinquish. The younger sister, Laura, a little later to become the wife of Stanley Gilbert (Aleck never quite forgave him), taught the neophyte to dance and permitted him to act as occasional escort to college parties. He promptly fell in love and, with that singular tenacity which characterized his early associations, preserved a gently romantic attachment for her to the day of her death, two years before his own. The letter he wrote me after the funeral, which I unfortunately have lost, is a touching and sincere tribute to an early love.

The college's impression of Woollcott was less favourable than his impression of the college. Of the fifty-five entrants in his class, he was easily the queerest. It was not an eccentricity which commended itself to his mates. His gnomish maturity and squeaky cocksureness marked him for a butt.

"They could not understand a freshman who had pondered, read, and thought so much," said Lloyd Paul Stryker, a senior when Woollcott matriculated.

As fraternity material he was unpromising. He conformed to no pattern of campus good form. Although he arrived under Sigma-Phi auspices (the Root family), the Sigs turned thumbs down on him, a

procedure which caused some immediate dissension between certain alumni and the chapter, as well as later heartburnings when the callow youth developed into Hamilton's most conspicuous alumnus.

Theta Delta Chi, at the time numerically weak, looked him over. His chief backer was Royal W. France, an influential young alumnus who had come back to help out the Theta Delt with their rushing. At first dubious, France took the freshman on a long walk and came back convinced that here was a "rare and specialized and highly exciting personality." Another backer was Merwyn Nellis, crack centre on the football team and otherwise a prominent campus figure. But several of the younger chapter members demurred. France writes that they "... looked a bit askance at Aleck, who, at that time, had a high-pitched voice, a slightly effeminate manner and an unusual—even eccentric—personality and appearance. He was far enough from the norm so that the first impression on a lot of healthy and immature boys was that he was a freak."

The objectors were persuaded or overruled and the freshman was *duly advised of his election. He was exultant.*

"It's a great life," he wrote Smyser Agnew, telling him of his new affiliation.

Of his fraternity mates he particularly admired a tough little sophomore named McMartin who played football, chewed tobacco, and might, his admirer thought, have been valedictorian had he not preferred bridge to books. While a loyal and even an enthusiastic Theta Delt, he did not limit his friendships to fellow members. His closest individual association, at least in his underclassman years, was Phil Welch, an athlete and a roughneck, member of a rival group; "idol of my heart and chum of my busy days," as he wrote Agnew.

The class of '09 was of unusual mental calibre. Through the centripetal force of common tastes a group of four formed within it whose tastes were intellectual as opposed to—not negligent of—athletics. Because of a certain preciousness they were derisively known as the Sorority. Throughout his course, Aleck was identified with this inner circle.

From the association there evolved a game of the brain-twister type which for a time enjoyed a wide vogue among those addicted to cerebral gymnastics. By Aleck's account, Hawley Truax, valedictorian of the class, was the originator, but others say that both Aleck and Bob Rudd contributed. "Shedding Light," as they called the pastime, eventually found its way between book covers as *Who and What?*

For the test an individual pits himself against the wits of the group. The propounder identifies himself with the character portrayed, giving a first-person description with deceptive but reasonably identifiable clues. For example:

I was the Helen of my time, irresistible in my beauty. I married in turn a weakling, a fool, and a brute, and I loved a fiddler. To the weakling I brought nothing; to the fool and the fiddler, death; to the brute, disaster. I was born to power but my personality and charm determined my career as much as my rank. I was a kingmaker who loved an alien country more than my own. A relative, weeping and distraught, killed me and I went to my death with a wig on lest men should see that my beauty had turned grey.

If the outline proved insufficient, the contestants could demand "More light," and the postulant must then answer any question not too leading.

The Woolcott contribution to the book was, as might have been expected, allusively difficult, though not unfairly obscure:

I have made sundry appearances on the world's stage. Once, long ago, I was charged with a somnolence that raised agricultural havoc, and was urged to perform a solo; a much later account of my life, also written in America, deals with a still longer sleep. I suppose that my military establishment would hardly have attained the specifications of the American Defence Society, but my forces made up in dogged loyalty what they lacked in numbers. I was also fond of pets and one of mine was true unto death and after. Neither my first name nor my last is known; I have always been called by an affectionate nickname derived from my regimentals.

The answer is Little Boy Blue, and the second reference is to Eugene Field's famous poem, while the allusion to agricultural havoc and the solo is obvious. As for the earlier example, it will hardly be necessary to identify that as Mary, Queen of Scots.

A modification of the game was being played at the Woolcott island home thirty years later.

Neither admittance to a fraternity nor inclusion in the group of budding intellectuals was enough to establish young Woolcott in the status to which he aspired. His fondest ambition was now to be accepted by the campus as "regular." But the root of the matter was not in him. Though his few intimates swore by him, the generality of his fellow students refused to take him at his own valuation. He was a "fresh Ike," a bit of a "sissy"; he did not quite belong.



Knowing himself a misfit in the collegiate pattern, he devised a personality for public display. He presented to his fellow the picture most likely, in his belief, to enlist their admiration, edifying his classmates with high-coloured tales of precocious vice. His nickname of "Putt" (for "putrid") flattered him. He was correspondingly depressed when a rebuking upperclassman stigmatized him as "a naughty little Rollo." Under the sting he did go down to the village and succeed in getting drunk, a condition which he vaingloriously advertised. Incredible though it may seem, he maintained this dubious pride, and, at the age of fifty, supplied this note on his undergraduate days, for a biographical sketch:

I was a good deal of a drunkard, being stinko through three of the four years, and particularly in Sophomore year addicted morosely to the use of absinthe which was available everywhere. . . . It would be accurate to describe me in my undergraduate days as a ubiquitous, depraved, and unpopular Ishmaelite.

It would be more accurate to describe him as a naïve and ineffectual self-dramatizer. After that first splurge, for advertising purposes only, his dissipations were mildly and conventionally beerish. It is doubtful whether he ever saw an absinthe bottle; certainly not within a ten-mile radius of the Hill. He was, in fact, a natural though not over-industrious scholar, as mentally mature as he was psychologically callow. His true preoccupations were with talking, reading, and things of the mind. As for his excursions into depravity, they were pure sham. A member of the class of 1910, who elects to remain anonymous, thus estimates him:

In his underclass years he was a picturesque, conspicuous young eccentric and was—and revelled in being—humorously thought of and slammed around as a "putrid." All through college and to a considerable extent for years afterwards, he had a social eye-to-business that made him more or less obsequious to anyone who would be or who some day might be of use to him, including those who were or would be impressive and with whom it would be good publicity to be associated. . . . He was conscious of his handicaps and obsessed with a deep conviction that his make-up, his personal endowment was one he'd simply got to make the best of and there was no use in his being thin-skinned about it. In other words—"I knew before you did that I'm an odd fish, so call me Putt or caricature me as you like and see if I care! I'll help you do it and go you one better."

Soon the precarious eminence won by his pretensions became un-

tenable. He pathetically strove to restore it by affecting slovenly dress and bizarre mannerisms. The faculty wives shuddered at "that dreadful little Woollcott cub." The younger feminine element was inclined to regard him as "cute." The sophomores made him the special quarry of their hazing; tossing "Slimer" Woollcott into the fountain became a popular form of exercise. There is an unauthenticated legend involving him and a familiar campus pest of the day, an octogenarian alumnus who was wont to revisit the scene from time to time and wander about, buttonholing students and catechizing them upon their aims in life. According to report, he held up the freshman, trotting oozily back to change after an involuntary bath at the hands of his persecutors, with the stock query:

"And what, my young friend, is our Alma Mater training you to become when you go out into the world?"

"A fish, you darn old fool!" said Woollcott bitterly.

Culturally the strongest influence in Aleck's course was his association with Professor Herman Carl George Brandt, a born teacher, a notable scholar, and a philologist of international repute. The jovial, irascible, sharp-tongued, warmhearted, and well-loved head of the Department of German did not take long to sense the unusual quality of Woollcott's mind and made him free of the house below the campus with its arched legend carved above the hospital stone portal, "Das liebe Haus, das beste Haus." The friendship long outlasted Aleck's course, and he never returned to the Hill without dropping in to visit "Schnitz" Brandt, the calls being often enlivened by a duel of sharpshooting at the participants' respective prejudices and foibles.

No less influential in the mental development of the owlsh under-graduate was Professor William P. Shepard of the Department of Romance Languages, another notable scholar. His broad, vital culture, far transcending the bounds of his own specialty, was devoted to that personal application to interested students which was, in those days, the peculiar virtue of the small college. As with Brandt, Aleck took away from the Hill when he left a warmth of feeling for "Bill Shep" which never waned.

There was one among his fellows who followed Smyser Agnew's earlier prevision of him as a future great man. Alex F. Osborn, who, as head of a large advertising agency, was later to pay his classmates a fabulous radio wage, was the prophet of success.

"Aleck," he would say earnestly, "you're going to be another. Dr.

Johnson. You're going to be a greater Dr. Johnson. Don't you let them get you down."

Whether or not Aleck believed Alex, his friend's faith encouraged him to try for literary honours. George M. Weaver, Jr., and I had founded an annual award for the best undergraduate writing in the *extracurricular field*, called, in commemoration of our class, the Ninety-one Manuscript Prize. Its sole distinction in college annals was destined to be that Alexander Woollcott was the first winner. His entry, "The Precipice: a Story of Bohemia," opened as follows:

"Pardon, my good woman," cried the Colonel, raising a protesting hand against the merry chatter with which he was beset. "Before you go on, just what sort of person is this Nana you're all talking about?"

I can still see George Weaver's face as he brought me this gem, fresh from the prize committee's hands.

"My God," said he. "Look what we've done."

This was not the worst. It could not have been, since his next year's attempt was unsuccessful. "Pearl" took its title from the beautiful and virtuous waitress who is discovered at the outset serving the hero, Billy, with oysters. Billy, a man of the world, a seductive fellow with a mordant wit, inspires the suspicion that Author Woollcott was not writing without a model in mind.

"Is that why they call you Pearl, my dear?" he asked, pointing to the oysters. "Or is it because you are without price?"

"Oh, no!" she retorted quickly. "It's because I'm cast before swine."

These excerpts are cited, not in wanton malice, but as explanation of why the author early and wisely abandoned the field of creative fiction to which his first ambitions tended. In his senior year he was the Ninety-one prize again.

His earlier success was the greater. With that instinct for profitable repetition which was to alarm and dismay future editors, after collecting the twenty-five dollars of prize money he sent the manuscript to *The Bohemian*, a contemporary pulp magazine, which paid him twelve dollars for it.

This is the first in a long succession of twice-sold tales.

His freshman vacation he spent doing janitor work in the Roycroft colony, Elbert Hubbard's pretentiously cultural project in East Aurora, N.Y.; "a debased Oberammergau," he called it. He brought back with

him an old .45-calibre revolver, picked up in a pawnshop, and exhibited it to the Sorority.

"Some morning," he said hollowly, "they'll knock at the door of Carnegie Eleven and there'll be no answer."

It was not wholly pose. The boy was really melancholic over his failure to be "regular." When, two years after graduation, a college mate asked him whether he actually had any suicidal intent, he replied soberly: "I thought I had. I was going through a mental conflict just then."

Failing to impress his circle by these dark hints, he turned tough. He ruffled around the campus, picking fights, preferably with the huskiest athletes. As he was of puny physique, these combats could have only one end.

"He never shirked a fight and never won one," Alex Osborn recalls.

After a football defeat, he would swagger up to some two-hundred-pound tackle and blithely accost him.

"Why, you big cheesebrain! You don't know enough to recognize your own signals."

One of his victims, thick of brain as he was of muscle, became so weary of beating up his tormentor that he took to scuttling around corners when the slight figure appeared, and eventually burst into helpless tears under the goad. Aleck was abashed.

"Why, I didn't know I was hurting his feelings," he confided to a friend. "I didn't know he *had* any feelings. I really kinda like the big stiff."

Though the adventures in pugilism did little to toughen the flabby body, they did endow the Woolcott spirit with hardihood and fortitude. The college began to have a sort of puzzled respect for the dogged and inglorious scrapper. It did not yet amount to popularity; Aleck never attained that; but it did constitute a reluctant recognition of character. He capitalized on it by organizing Hamilton's first permanent dramatic club, The Charlatans, in which he consistently played feminine lead. So expert did he prove as an actor that the glee club took him on tour as a monologist in the character of "Mabel, the Beautiful Shopgirl," his own creation.

His passion for dramatics, begun when he appeared in the *tableaux vivants* of Sash-curtain Row, intensified by his theatre attendance with Roswell M. Field and by the private theatricals of Germantown, and professionalized, so to speak, by his support of E. H. Sothorn, now

became a ruling passion of his undergraduate days. He assumed for himself the feminine lead of *The Charlatans*. Once, while away, learning that a cast had been made up without him, he wired with the berserk fury of a thwarted prima donna, "What do you fools think you're doing? No Woolcott, no play." He cut classes, going to Utica to "take in the show," good or bad. He spent hours in the library reading drama, from Plautus to Pinero. He wrote several short stories dealing with footlight life, which did not get into *The Bohemian*—or anywhere else.

He was a brilliant student, learning with little effort and expanding far beyond the requirements of the course. In an exceptionally high-calibre class, he took his Phi Beta Kappa Key in junior year. In one department he was strangely unsuccessful. It has always seemed to me something of a reflection upon my Alma Mater that a college which specially prided itself on its training in public speaking should have ignored a talent destined to develop into so notable a success. Alexander Woolcott was never so much as "placed" in the chapel oratorical contests.

Indifference if not hostility to one of Hamilton's most settled traditions, Mandevillian oratory, is the explanation. Students were so thoroughly drilled in all the emphases and nuances of high-flown rhetoric that one of the foremost speakers of his time, a Clark Prize Oration winner, was able to apply it with brilliant success to no more promising a medium than the alphabet. Louis J. Ehret, '04, rang the changes from A to Z with such passion, fervour, and variety of voice and gesture, that his chapel audience was thrilled and his performance lives in tradition of the Hill as a landmark of eloquence.

Presumably Alexander Woolcott, if present, would not have been among those thrilled. His interest was in dramatic and naturalistic expression.

"He saw no relation between dramatics and oratory," says Professor J. D. Ibbotson, then 'of the faculty. "He went through the forms of declamation, debate, and so on as required, but with no effort at distinction."

In junior year Woolcott attained to the hitherto uncoveted editorship of the *Lit* (*Hamilton Literary Monthly*, by formal title), into which flaccid organ he injected so much vivacity that, from being a dull and mechanical reprint of chapel orations and prize essays, it developed into a formative influence in campus life.

Vacations were devoted to earning money. He pushed a wheeled chair and took tickets at Chautauqua, where he hoped that he might (but did not) profit by the cultural opportunities; waited on table, read to hospital patients at fifty cents an hour, and worked in field and orchard at the Phalanx. Yet he was chronically short of cash and laments his inability to pay for a Senior Ball ticket, one year. Why is not clear. Patron Humphreys' annual \$750 would amply cover all maintenance charges. There was the scholarship to help out. Not only did he pick up quite a bit by his various enterprises, but from the Phalanx a family friend, Mr. Sauerwein, "often donates a little cash." If young Aleck found himself cramped in his social activities, it was because he was spendthrift in other directions.

Much as his status had improved by junior year, he still had fits of depression which, though they led to the acquisition of no more pistols, did so darken his vista that he considered dropping out of college. He might have done so but for the support of a new friend and fraternity mate, Albert A. Getman of the class of 1911. Getman was a lad as solid of character as of physique. He was a good scholar, a crack football player, and almost at once one of the popular figures of the campus, altogether such a one as Aleck most desired to be himself. There began a friendship which never flagged and which proved one of the most stable and influential in Aleck's life.

By his senior year he had become, in the words of a classmate, "easily the most remarkable and accomplished person on the campus." This same friend said to him with the frankness, verging on brutality, which was then a campus fashion among intimates:

"I suppose you are the most unpopular man in college, Aleck."

"Yes; and you, I suppose, are the most popular," returned Woollcott composedly, without a trace of irony, leaving his detractor "speechless and deflated."

"This quality" (in Woollcott), he writes, "few people ever noted; that he could squash with a compliment as well as with a smashing blow."

In the spring of 1909 I was talking with some fellow trustees on the library steps when an odd figure came into view, crossing the campus with an undulant prance. The youth was clad in excessively wrinkled and bagged trousers, a misshapen corduroy coat, grimy sneakers, and a red fez with gilt tassel. As this preceded the ragtag-and-bobtail era of campus fashion, the costume was patently devised to produce an effect.

Besides the mild astonishment evoked by this grotesquerie, I was struck with the owlish gravity of the eyes behind the large lenses, and an air not so much cocky as confident, suggesting the trustfulness of a tenderly reared baby.

Introducing himself as Alexander H. Woollcott, he mentioned that he had just won for the second time the prize "generously offered by you and Mr. Weaver." With that doggedly bohemian *conte*, "The Precipice," thus recalled to my mind, I suppose I must have shuddered, for he blinked uncertainly and murmured that he had hoped for my help in getting a job. What kind of job? A newspaper job.

I tried to picture that egregious figure, the all-important copy of *The Bohemian* tucked beneath its arm, telling a metropolitan desk that it would like to be a journalist, and I am afraid I shuddered again. Alexander H. Woollcott continued to talk, in tones somewhat less assured. Would I mind stepping inside and looking over a few numbers of the *Lit*?

Having done so, I felt better. The editorials were spirited, timely, and mature. The selective judgment was sound. The non-fiction contributions signed A. W. (he had dropped the Humphreys in the interests of euphony) went far to obliterate the dire memories of the bohemian Nana and the virtuous Pearl. When he asked, diffidently enough, whether I did not think that he might make a reporter, I was able to give him a qualified affirmative. At least, he could write.

He became more expansive. Upon graduation he would badly need a job. Indeed, he must have one, if he was to continue eating. Nothing was to be hoped for from his family, whose fortunes were at extreme ebb. Further aid from Mr. Humphreys he would not accept. The principalship of a public school in Hudson, N.Y., was available, but he mistrusted his ability to handle pupils of twice his weight. He had had enough battering from his peers.

So I wrote, on his behalf, to one of my old bosses of the *Sun*, Carr Van Anda, who, as managing editor, was then raising *The Times* to the position of being the most important and influential newspaper in New York. To the best of my recollection and that of the recipient my support was on the cautious side. I guaranteed nothing, but gave my opinion, for what it was worth, that the young man had possibilities, and that it might be worth while to give him a trial.

Some thirty-odd years afterwards, my old friend "Van" had a jog of memory. He seemed to recall (correctly) that he had never acknow-

ledged my letter. So he sat down and wrote, thanking me warmly for having recommended Alexander Woollcott to *The Times*, and added that he wished I had sent several more like him.

Hamilton served Alexander Woollcott well. It gave him a sound cultural education. It toughened his fibre morally and physically. It confirmed two of his ruling tendencies, writing and showmanship. A small college, while it does not afford so broad an entry upon life as a great university, gives more scope to personality. There is less pressure towards a patterned form; individuality, not conformity, is the criterion of success. On the other hand, its intimate contacts tend to tone down and chasten extremes of self-assertiveness. This it did to a limited degree for Undergraduate Woollcott.

He took with him lasting and affectionate associations with the Roots, with the Percy Saunders, with Phil Welch, Bob Rudd, Hawley Truax, the foremost scholar and valedictorian of '09, with Al Getman, afterwards his physician, with Walker McMartin, Lloyd Stryker, Harry Esty Dounce, Alex Osborn, George Gouge, and, above all, with the college itself. His career was to be stormy with the violence of quarrels and the pain of disrupted friendships. But his companions of the campus were immune from his injuries. The peculiar and in a sense illogical quality of his sentiment shines in his having risen from a sick bed at the age of fifty-five and gone, literally at risk of his life, to the funeral of one whom he had loved as a college mate but who had, for many years, ceased to count for anything in his scheme of existence.

Even with the considerable measure of prominence and success accruing to him in senior year, he was still unfulfilled and thwarted. He would far rather have "made" *Pentagon*, the undergraduate-elected honour society, than *Phi Beta Kappa*. He would have preferred a modest popularity to stardom in *The Charlatans* or the editorship of *Lit.* Always he was acutely conscious—and, by a queer perversity, more than a little proud—of being exotic, egregious, never quite in tune. Alex Osborn thought that the fondest hope of his course, disappointed throughout the four years, was to be generally accepted without any reservations of fellowship.

He was never quite adjusted, never really happy. It is the more strange that he should have given to the college the most steadfast and enduring loyalty of his heart.

"When Aleck dies," said Dorothy Parker, "he'll go to Hamilton."



## FIFTEEN A WEEK

ON the morning after his investment with the degree of Bachelor of Philosophy, Alexander Woolcott turned up at *The Times* office to apply for a job. Disappointment met him on the threshold. There was no opening. Managing Editor Van Anda read my letter of introduction, received the bearer affably, talked with him, encouraged him to hope that there would be a chance in the fall: he might keep in touch with the City Desk.

Distant prospects did not meet the emergency. Aleck must eat and lodge. The Phalanx was in the hands of the sheriff. A job—any job that would support him—was an immediate necessity. Through Mr. Humphreys' influence he was taken on at the Chemical National Bank as a messenger. He hated "the gyves of finance." Money as an entity he disliked and distrusted. The ferment of Phalanx tradition worked within him. To him the rich were enemies of the republic: he resented their privilege and misprized their power. He thought of himself as a Socialist, without any real comprehension of what it meant. To the end his political and economic thinking, coloured by emotion and prejudice, was, notwithstanding his sincerity, superficial and unclear.

His bank duties were performed with punctual and uninspired fidelity. His ambitions were in no wise engaged; the last thing in the world that he ever wanted to be was a bank president in a cutaway coat bulging with Union League Club dinner. A higher, more glamorous grail beckoned him onwards; with singleness of purpose his soul was set on the job of reporting.

Sister Julie, now employed by a Jersey City public utility, had found for herself cheap lodgings at 34 West Twelfth Street. There she was joined by Aleck and the "idol of his college days," Phil Welch, now a "leg man" on the *Sun*. They lived by a system of communal finance, managed by Julie. Each payday the two young men turned over to her the bulk of their wages. Invariably towards the end of the week, Aleck would run short of cigarette money and come to her for relief. Argument followed, for she was a stern exponent of thrift. The result was that Aleck became an unpopular figure in the house; the other boarders,

ignorant of the fiscal arrangement, saw in him a young spendthrift ignobly cadging on the wages of a victimized sister!

Fifteen dollars a week, Aleck's wage, would sustain life in those days, but hardly on the level of luxury. Phil Welch was making little more; Julie, less if anything. Their pooled resources barely sufficed for essentials. Mrs. Ned Root, dropping in upon the impecunious ménage one day, took cognizance of their budget and expressed concern.

"I don't see how you manage to live."

"Simple enough," said Aleck airily. "We borrow."

"But of whom?"

"Each other," he replied.

Every Saturday afternoon Aleck trotted up to *The Times* office and patiently renewed his application. He was resolved that Mr. Van Anda should not forget him. Van Anda did not. Persistence is a valuable quality in a reporter; Aleck's was accounted to him for virtue, and in September he had his reward. A fifteen-dollar-a-week job was offered him. Joyously he resigned from the bank. He would have accepted half the salary to get out of finance into journalism. *Hamilton Life* noted his appointment with an editorial expression of scepticism. "Putt" Woollcott and "all-the-news-that's-fit-to-print" impressed the *Life* commentator as an incongruous combination.

Meantime disaster had befallen him. On a midsummer morning he awoke with a temperature and a swelling behind the ears. He fled to the refuge of the Phalanx, now restored to the Bucklin management at forced sale. Julie was there, recovering from a minor operation. Mrs. Woollcott put her second patient to bed, diagnosing mumps. It was a severe case. "That beastly complication," as the sufferer termed it, set in. In great pain he dosed himself with Julie's morphine for a fortnight, when the swelling began to subside. But the damage was done. Thereafter he was, if not totally neutralized, permanently depleted of sexual capacity. Another sequel was the unhealthy fat of semi-eunuchism.

He was wholly recovered and in good health when he entered upon his newspaper duties. He could not have found a better training-school. *The Times* had sloughed off its burden of stodgy conventionalism, but it was still the organ of the "classes," enjoying a repute which is mirrored in the contemporary legend of the old family butler who entered the drawing-room of Mrs. Paran Stevens, with the announcement:

"Five reporters, madam, and a gentleman from *The Times*."

The office could have staffed a School of Journalism. Adolph Ochs, who had bought the paper fifteen years before, was a young Chattanooga newspaper owner, a man of rigid ideals in a supple and ingenious mind, who in ten years had made out of the decrepit, bargain-counter daily (he had paid only \$75,000 for it) an influential and respected organ. After ten years of experimentation, he took over from the *Sun* Carr Van Ande, giving him a free hand in hiring, firing, and editorial control. All he asked was that the new managing editor should make of *The Times* a better paper than it had been hitherto. Van Ande did.

He was a definite type of journalist, quite unlike the stage model. He was quiet of manner and spirit, serene in any crisis, an unerring judge of news as of newsmen, unassertive yet authoritative, jealously insistent upon professional ethics, possessing all the enterprise of yellow journalism without its contemptuous disregard of principles, and a man of instant decisions, pretty generally, though not always, correct. Graduate of a demi-college in the Middle West, he had climbed the ladder from the press-room up, acquiring culture on the way through omnivorous reading, and was a learned amateur of such diversities as astronomy, steeple-chasing, and Egyptian scarabs. Alceck Woolcott held him in reverential regard. To him Van Ande was one of the eminent figures of American journalism, with few peers in Park Row history. Many contemporaries will agree with that estimate, the present writer among them.

Of a different breed was Arthur Greaves, who, as City Editor, was the cub reporter's immediate superior. Greaves was the old-school editor, self-educated, and with printer's ink under his fingernails. He was a rough but fair-minded executive, an expert of news values, and a driver. A classic of the office illustrates his imperturbability. "Skipper" Williams, the veteran ship-news reporter, was sent out on a special assignment, and returned on a Tuesday two years later. Striding to his accustomed desk, he growled:

"Who moved my typewriter?"

Greaves looked up from his assignment book.

"What the hell are you doing here on your day off?" he demanded.

Greaves assigned Woolcott to cover the criminal courts, as dull and mechanical a routine as any on the calendar. Soon he began to show flashes of originality. Night City Editor Frederick T. Birchall, later to

be Berlin correspondent and a Pulitzer Prize winner, recognized a special talent and cultivated it by giving him a chance at "human-interest stories" in the evenings, after the courts closed. Presently he graduated into general work at an increased salary.

Hollywood's roseate and alcoholic picturizations to the contrary notwithstanding, reporting is and always has been a sober and laborious business. Young Woolcott had his share of the drudgery, on death-watches, or the long-wait trick (3 a.m.), on routine and colourless assignments. He took it all as it came, without complaint. He wrote his mother that he loved it, though he never expected to make any money at it.

As in school and in college he failed to fit conformably into his environment. A contemporary of his on *The Times* staff thinks that he was never admitted to the full freemasonry of the City Room; that, in the rough, good-humoured give-and-take current among cub reporters, he was "somehow playing outside the rules and had best be kept at a distance."

"In exchanges of insulting badinage," this man recalls, "he soon came to be feared. His insulters spoke extempore, clumsily, and good-naturedly; it was a game. Woolcott often worked over and polished in advance his insults and held them in reserve for an opening and for an audience. If such an opening was slow in coming, he contrived one—and the insult would be so swift and so poisonous in its aptness and its unexpected and shocking vindictiveness that the victim would be left floundering and speechless."

As to his reportorial ability there is a wide divergence of opinion. Van Anda, Greaves, and Birchall all approved his work. Silas Bent and Jane Grant, fellow staff members, thought that he was not and never could be a good reporter; to the latter he once expressed that disbelief in himself. John K. Winkler, then on the *Press*, considered him slipshod and careless of facts; far more interested in the manner than the matter of a report. On the other hand, two Hamilton men on the *Sun*, Harry Esty Dounce and Phil Welch, vouch for his merits. To Welch he was "the most brazen newshound in New York," while Dounce declared him "a wonder at stepping through or over obstacles and barriers that would have daunted most youngsters at that stage of the game, and at demanding and getting the news."

Thomas R. Ybarra, his contemporary on the paper, suggests the difficulty of definition:

I have never been quite sure of just what is meant by "good reporter." There are so many ways of being one. That Aleck Woollcott may have done some news stories extremely well, and others not so well, is, I am sure, true—who hasn't done just that even on the most rarefied heights inhabited by that mysterious being, the consistently "good" reporter? . . . To the best of my knowledge and belief Aleck *was* a good reporter. He had been on *The New York Times* only a short time when he began to get good assignments and he continued to get them right along until his strong natural bent led him into the field of dramatic criticism. Then, of course, there was no more general news reporting for him; but the traits of the born journalist asserted themselves in that field, also, backed by the extraordinary special gifts which made of him the Aleck Woollcott whom we knew in the fruitful and spectacular years of his maturity as writer, critic, and human being.

Aleck took due account of "the old-fashioned penchant of Mr. Van Anda for reporters who went out after stories and got them."

Whether or not he was a good reporter, he was an enthusiastic one. Reporting, he assured his niece when she sought a newspaper job, was the most entertaining of occupations. Never, to the very end of his life, did he emancipate himself from the emotional thralldom of that apprenticeship. It was more than twenty years after his departure from Newspaper Row that a distinguished friend of his died and he " . . . had to suppress a strong impulse to go right down to *The Times* office and push away from his typewriter whatever young man was writing the obituary notice."

There is no question but that the journalistic neophyte preferred the picturesque to the important. Early in his apprenticeship a story "broke" at the Waldorf which he jealously and permanently regretted having missed. Peacock Alley, the long corridor of that most magnificent of the period's hotels, was the public fashion show of the élite. The present age can hardly conceive the shock to the then extant Four Hundred when a perfectly dressed incognita, occupying one of the gilded chairs, drew out a cigarette, fixed it into a holder, and proceeded nonchalantly to smoke in the face of New York's Best People. A woman who had the outward indications of a lady, smoking publicly in 1910!

People gathered, awestruck. Pale officials rushed to the contaminated spot. The house detective was summoned and made whispered representations. The female desperado rose with smiling dignity and was escorted to the exit where, still placidly smoking, she took a cab.

Whether it was bravado or advertisement of a new cigarette was never discovered. Learning of the revolutionary episode through office gossip, young Woollcott nerved himself to ask for the assignment, but it had already gone to some other reporter who gave it a dull and spiritless rendition. Aleck always believed that he had missed a great opportunity in that story.

His reputation, when it did blossom, was rooted in a far more serious event. Walter Davenport, now Associate Editor of *Collier's*, then a cub reporter on the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, tells the story. He was sent to Coatesville, Pa., where a feeble-minded negro had shot and killed a policeman. Five hundred steel workers stormed the hospital where the negro lay with a police bullet in his body, took him out, and roasted him to death over a slow fire while two thousand onlookers cheered. Young Davenport was interviewing the burgess of the town, a frightened and sullen old party named Shallcross, and trying vainly to draw from him a statement of his intentions. He set down his memory of the scene twenty years later:

At that moment when I was about to stamp futilely out, a cherubic stranger entered with a minuet step, notebook in left hand and a beautiful pencil poised thereover in the right. Blandly, without rancour, and in neatly chosen words this one calm soul in all Coatesville said, "Mr. Shallcross, I represent *The New York Times*, which must insist that you take immediate measures to fetch the perpetrators of this wholly unnecessary outrage to book or justice or whatever your quaint custom may be here in Coatesville."

Mr. Shallcross, who was no mental giant, attempted feebly to wave away this disturber of his peace. He got the second barrel.

"My personal feelings and opinions aside," said the visitor in measured accents, "it becomes again necessary for me to warn you that *The New York Times* will not overlook reticence on your part."

The unhappy and bewildered official moaned. The two reporters left. Outside, Davenport addressed the unknown.

"Jesus, kid!" he said.

"Ss-sh-sh-sh!" returned the other austerely.

*The Times* report was a sizzler. On the day of its printing the City Room got a telephone call.

"Can you tell me who wrote that Coatesville lynching story?"

"A young man named Woollcott," said Greaves. "Who is this?"

"Richard Harding Davis. They don't do newspaper writing any better than that."

"I'll be glad to tell him, Mr. Davis," said Greaves.

Woollcott received the compliment without undue elation, though he was thenceforth a confirmed Davis worshipper. There were no early evidences of a swelled head. Birchall notes specially that "he was as naïve and modest a youngster as ever entered a newspaper office. . . . He even had a wholesome regard for, and a slight awe of, the copy desk."

Front-page news was presently turned over to him. He was sent to Halifax to handle the *Titanic* disaster. With practically no aid he covered the Rosenthal murder, to which other papers assigned half a dozen staff men. This was the sensational shooting of a gambler who had incurred the enmity of Police Lieutenant Becker. At his instigation four gangsters invaded a Broadway restaurant and pumped Rosenthal full of lead, a crime for which Becker went to the chair. It was "front-page stuff" for weeks.

The strain was too much for Woollcott's nervous system, which broke under it. He got a six weeks' leave to recuperate. When he returned, he had lost his taste for reporting. He applied for the rewrite job, which involved office night work. At this, too, he was successful. It gave him opportunity to develop his expanding style. He became known as the champion space-grabber of the office.

His family circumstances had altered. Walter Woollcott had returned to the *Phalanx* with the avowed intention of starving himself to death, a project he abandoned in high resentment when he found it was affecting his ability to lie abed, reading all day. Instead, he undertook to drink himself to death. This landed him in an institution which he liked so ill that he sobered up, went to New York, fell in with a firm of clothing manufacturers whose accounts were badly muddled, and straightened out the books so successfully that they kept him on at a ten-thousand-dollar salary. He settled in Brooklyn and concerned himself with the *Phalanx* no more, not even to the extent of sending an occasional cheque. So part of Aleck's increased salary must now go to his mother. Enough was left to justify an improved standard of living.

Sister Julie had become engaged to Charles Taber, whose family ran an unprofitable printing and engraving business. He was a quiet, amiable man, addicted to mannered locutions, concerning which Aleck used to complain petulantly:

"Why must Charles frame every sentence as if he were writing an eighteenth-century letter?"

In view of Julie's impending departure and his own easier circumstances, there was no reason for Aleck's remaining at the boarding-house. His friend Al Getman, having graduated from Hamilton, was planning to study medicine in New York. Aleck was overjoyed. His friendship with the younger man, though of but two years' duration, had taken deeper root than any other college association.

"Your rating is just a little higher than that of any other man I have found in this world," he wrote to Al five years later, an estimate which remained unmodified thereafter. Together they took a small and comfortable flat on West Fifteenth Street, with a commodious living-room which became a refuge for job-hunting Hamiltonians. The only requirement was that they should be willing to sit up and listen to Aleck's post-city-room conversation. George F. Gouge, 1911, who occupied the divan for six workless weeks, preserves a vivid memory of his host's nocturnal loquacity:

"It was a fascinating period for me because, after the humdrum day of looking for a job, Aleck would come in at two o'clock in the morning, waking Al and myself up, and give us the unadulterated news of the day in the manner in which only he could dish it out. It caused no objections on Al's part or mine. We were quite willing to be wakened in the middle of the night to listen to the dissertations."

With somewhat less suavity Franklin Adams, the famous F.P.A. of "The Conning Tower" and *Pepys' Diary*, was to note that "Aleck would go down to the corner to buy a paper and devote an evening of Johnsonian discourse to it, monopolizing the conversation."

It was *The Times'* policy to encourage the late reporters to hang around the office after the regular edition was put to bed, in case a big story might break after hours. Thus there was inaugurated a back-room poker game, at which Aleck was a regular. One midnight a personal call for Woolcott came over the wire. He resumed his place, finished the hand, and said:

"Deal me out, I'll be back in an hour."

The message was from the Brooklyn morgue. Walter Woolcott had fallen dead in the street. Aleck identified the remains, arranged for cremation, and came back to the office to finish the game.

Asked to supply an obituary record long afterwards, this singular son wrote of his singular father:



"He was variously active as a lawyer, accountant, federal officeholder, promoter, stock exchange gambler, and (I suspect) crook. He was undoubtedly insane and on one occasion had to be locked up."

There is no basis whatsoever for the ascription of crookedness, other than in the son's penchant for lurid dramatization. For some inexplicable reason he told several of his later friends that Walter Woollcott had died in South America on a business trip.

An aura of undissipated mystery, which he may have fostered for his own sardonic amusement, hangs about Walter Woollcott's antecedents. Kansas City friends recall that he would sometimes omit or misplace an aspirate, whereupon he would shout with laughter, exclaiming:

"See what comes of having been born within earshot of Bow Bells!"

If, indeed, he derived from cockney stock, it must have been of an uncommon type. There is extant a letter of his written from France to his parents when he was a youth of fifteen, couched in expert French. Illiterate cockney families did not, in the 1860's, send their young abroad to be educated. To such neighbours as Lucy Christie Drage and the Fields he gave every evidence of cultural and social background. They suspect that the error of the *h*'s may have been a blind.

Voluble enough upon impersonal topics, the elder Woollcott was reticent about his childhood. Once, however, he related to his son William an episode which may have indicated an uncertainty as to his origins. It concerned a fruitless inquiry into family history, when, in middle age, he made a trip to London. Over an obscure bookshop in a little street off the Strand, his eye caught the name "Woollcott." The American entered and inquired for the proprietor. A furtive and frightened woman parried all questions. Mr. Woollcott was away. She could not give his address. She did not know when he would be back. She was ignorant of his family connections. She did not know anything. The visitor got the impression that the absent bookseller was, at best, a fugitive from his creditors; at worst, in jail. The ancestral search terminated in a dead end.

Editorial writing now occurred to Alexander Woollcott as a pleasant change from the hard demands of the City Room. To prepare for it he enrolled at Columbia for his master's degree, taking Origins of European Society, Evolution of Progressive Society, General History of Political Theories, and English Prose in the Nineteenth Century. The

high-sounding programme came to nothing. He dropped it after one term.

With Getman he had moved into one of the postgraduate dormitories. There he encountered the Perennial Student, William Cullen Bryant Kemp. Mr. Kemp graduated in the class of 1872. After making enough money in business to retire on a modest competence, he re-enrolled as a student in 1902, thereafter taking various degrees, living on the campus, cheering happily at football games, and living a care-free collegiate life until his withdrawal to the Columbia University Club in 1922. This sincere devotion to an ideal of existence fired the Woolcott imagination. Here was a man who knew what he wanted. Here, in a vacillating and illogical world, was purpose and stability.

Aleck scraped acquaintance with his fellow student and subsequently wrote of him with Woolcottian felicity and inaccuracy. He accepted without investigation the baseless campus legend that Mr. Kemp was in receipt of a testamentary income which was to accrue only so long as the beneficiary should remain in college. The instance is typical of his method as a raconteur. He would always prefer colour to fact, rainbow to substance.

Accuracy was never permitted by him to become a fetish. A self-descriptive passage by Charles Macomb Flandrau, quoted by Woolcott, would have been equally applicable to the quoter: "... he is not inclined to exaggerate the importance of exactitude and is perpetually interested in the casual, the florid, and the problematical."

Unable to create fiction, Woolcott could employ the quasi-fictional slant of his mind to embellish or reshape, sometimes even to distort fact, with incomparable dexterity. In his chosen métier there was no great harm in this, though embarrassment to his publishers sometimes ensued. Not to himself; so far as can be ascertained, he was never discountenanced when confronted with his amiable malfeasances. And no conscientious, truth-bound reports could have been half so delightful.

Though still obscure, he was beginning to get around. George Madden Martin, authoress of that classic of little-girlhood, *Emmy Lou* (still going into new editions after nearly half a century), met him at J. Pierpont Morgan's house. She was chatting with her host on a sofa before dinner, when a round-faced, boyish unknown approached, beamed upon her through large spectacles, quoted verbatim a passage from her book, and said:

"I am a murgwump and your true friend, Alexander Woolcott."

Not a dozen men in New York would have had the temerity to interrupt the formidable autocrat of finance. After a puzzled glance, Mr. Morgan smilingly tolerated the newcomer, who sat down and took charge of the conversation. It was the beginning of a lifelong fellowship between Mrs. Martin and her true friend, the mugwump.

In the fall of 1913 Van Anda offered him the Paris office of *The Times*. Woollcott declined it. He had no taste for executive work. Journalistically Paris was a backwater. Moreover, though he had never revealed his purpose to anyone in authority, and though he saw no prospect of attaining his ambition, he was still doggedly set upon becoming a dramatic critic.

## 6

## ENCHANTED AISLES

STANDING, one winter evening of 1914, at the Knickerbocker Bar, where the jolly and luminous Maxfield Parrish mural of Old King Cole lent a special savour to one's cocktail, I was accosted by a rotund young man who said with an air of reproach verging upon accusation:

"You don't remember me. I'm Woollcott."

"I do," said I. "How are you?"

"You told Mr. Van Anda that I would make a good reporter."

"Are you a good reporter?"

"I was," said he with *empressement*.

"Have you left *The Times*?"

"No. I've just been made dramatic critic."

He was bubbling with enthusiasm. Adolph Klauber, he explained, having married the beautiful young Jane Cowl, had resigned his post to become a producer, and Van Anda had raised Aleck to the job, and coincidentally to the seventh heaven, without so much as an inkling of his passion for things and persons theatrical.

"I was agreeably surprised to learn that he was an ardent student of the drama," wrote the managing editor in explaining his choice, "for I was taking a chance without that knowledge, and equally surprised that, in spite of his bent, he had not applied for the place, which, it

appeared, was due to youthful diffidence. He ultimately persuaded the world at large, I believe, that he was no longer so handicapped."

For a decade, with one interlude, the world of the theatre was to be Alexander Woolcott's world; its footlights his sun, moon, and stars; its life in play as in work, his life; its people his chosen and cherished associates. Through it he was to make his first step to fame and fortune. To the very time of his death it was occupying his thoughts and engaging his hopes.

The editorial selection of Woolcott had been made because Van Anda believed that the theatre had, *per se*, specific news value and that a dramatic critique ought to be so written as to interest someone besides actors, managers, and first-nighters. He had adopted Terence's apophthegm for his policy; nothing that was human should be alien to the reader-interest of *The Times*. "All the News That's Fit to Print" flaunted its slightly self-righteous motto at the masthead. Why not bypass the fulsome artifacts of the press agents and humanize the theatre?

There was still of current report in the office a horrible example of the theatrical writer's isolationism. One, Thomas S. Jones, Jr., whose poetry later appeared in the anthologies, was dramatic reporter for *The Times* when Harry Thaw murdered Stanford White, on Madison Square Roof Garden. Strolling into the office after the first edition was off the press, he glanced through the first-page, first-column introduction, and remarked:

"There are a couple of mistakes here."

"What's that?" said the late-desk man. "How do you know?"

"Why, I saw it. I was there."

"You *saw* it! Jumping Jesus! Why didn't you bring it in?"

"Neither of them had any stage connections," said Theatrical Reporter Jones blandly. "I inquired."

Woolcott's reportorial sense could be trusted not to miss any such opportunity. He was pardonably proud of his promotion as any man not yet thirty might well be. Pleasurably he reflected that this branch of journalism had been embellished with such names as Dickens, Poe, Whitman, Eugene Field, Richard Harding Davis, Elihu Root, and Edward Bok. A vista of delights spread before him. He was to have the backstage entrée to all theatres. He would meet on terms of professional intimacy the headliners of the billboards. And for this unbelievable satisfaction of his fondest ambitions he was to receive the generous salary of sixty dollars a week.

To his envious office mates he chuckled that he took the job only because he thought that Jane Cowl went with it. He wrote exultantly to his mother of his preferment. She replied:

"I should think it would be very narrowing."

To prepare him for his new duties, *The Times* had sent him abroad, Europe being then the freshman course in dramatic criticism. Eight weeks of theatre in London and Paris were prescribed. He had been in England less than a week when Brock Pemberton, second-string critic of the *World*, arrived. He was met at the pier by his confrère of *The Times*, with the greeting:

"Anyone in London you'd like to meet?"

So confident was the air with which it was said, so lordly the gesture, that the impressed Pemberton could almost see Literature, Art, and the Theatre, with the nobility and gentry of England in the background, waiting around the corner upon Mr. Woolcott's beck. Nor was it all bluff. With that capacity for ingratiating himself with the important which his mates had noted at college, the young man had promptly acquired a considerable list of acquaintances.

In Paris the neophyte met Burns Mantle, who gave him fatherly advice. No writer, he counselled, should consort with stage folk. They were lovable and fascinating creatures (else they would not be on the stage): so alluring, indeed, that if a critic fell into the perilous habitude of association with them he would inevitably become entangled in friendships and prejudices to such an extent that he would lose prestige and his value to his paper would be undermined.

The young man listened with outer respect and inner dissent. Mantle's views controverted all the dearest desires of his heart. What had he become a dramatic critic for if not to enter into and share the charmed life of these luminous beings? How was one to write intelligently and readably about the personages of the stage unless he knew them? Whence was he to dig out material for his columns if not at first hand from them? Not for Alexander Woolcott to languish on the outside, looking in. He was going next day to make a friendly call on Sarah Bernhardt!

Writes Mr. Mantle in humorous-rueful retrospect:

Next winter Aleck, as the new and already colourful critic of *The Times*, did seek the friendship and comradeship of actors; did do a lot of partying, and shortly became the most talked-of and the widest-read dramatic critic in town. So much for Mantle as teacher and prophet.

Nevertheless, the unheeded teacher and prophet had spoken the eternal truth. Though he never consciously compromised in the matter of theatrical opinion, Woolcott was inevitably influenced by his fervent personal admirations and affections.

Dramatic criticism, in the second decade of the twentieth century, was on no lofty level. At its best, as exemplified by Percy Hammond and Ashton Stevens in Chicago, Philip Hale in Boston, and Gilbert Gabriel and Burns Mantle in New York, it was competent and honest. At its worst it was biased and corrupt. In between it was timid and noncommittal.

Writing on theatrical topics was diluted by the fear of the advertiser. Theatre notices paid the highest rates. The purpose of a theatre page, made up of news, criticism, and press agency about actors and actresses, was to secure a maximum of this highly regarded class of advertisement. Some of the lesser metropolitan reviewers combined their function with that of advertising solicitor, a system which did not make for impartial reviewing. Reduced to its baldest terms, it amounted to this, "Give me an ad and I'll give you a boost." The pay of this species of critic-cadger was a percentage on the revenue he brought in.

Not that many critics were venal. But, for the most part, they wrote under a pull, knowing that their copy could be mauled beyond recognition by an advertisement-conscious copy desk, or distorted through the friendship of the newspaper owner or managing editor for some actor or actress. The newspapers themselves were uncomfortably conscious of the condition. As influential a daily as the *Brooklyn Eagle* declared flatly:

Many publications, in other respects reliable, have sold their space, directly or indirectly, to boost any and every attraction that has been sufficiently liberal in advertising with them. . . . The increasing number of publications which publish noncommittal reviews is likewise a menace. . . . The public that is told that every play is "the success of the century" and "a dramatic triumph" will refuse to believe the printed word about a really meritorious attraction.

The theatrical pages sinned in another respect. They were dull. Dramatic criticism (when not taken *in toto* from the press agent's print mill) was addressed exclusively to the highbrow element. It might be ornamented with the wit and precision of a Percy Hammond or illuminated by the brilliant verbal coruscations of a George Jean Nathan, but it was printed for and read by a sharply limited fraction

of the public. By and large it still took its tone from that Pontifex Maximus of his calling, the venerable William Winter, he who brokenly implored Mme Modjeska not to sully a noble art by playing a fallen woman (*La Dame aux Camélias*, forsooth!) and declared that "the question of divorce is not fit for stage presentment: the theatre is not the place to discuss questions." Mr. Winter was wont to discourse to the rapt clientele of the *Tribune* in such terms as these:

Ada Rehan, who had given the best representation of Rosalind that has been seen in our times, evinced, in her acting of Portia, an exact discrimination between the qualities of the two characters, emphasizing the intellectual qualities in the lady of Belmont, while freely and fully depicting the romantic, exalted, tremulous, and various conditions and emotions appurtenant to love.

On such windy rhetoric was the public fed. It struck no awe to the soul of young Mr. Woollcott, who paid his respects to the pontifical school to the following purport:

There is a popular notion that a dramatic criticism, to be worthy of the name, must be an article of at least 1,000 words, mostly polysyllables and all devoted—perfectly devoted—to the grave discussion of some play as written and performed. . . . The tradition of prolixity and the dullness in all such writing is as old as Aristotle and as lasting as William Archer.

Needless to say, the super-exalted classic style made small appeal to the typical first-night audience of the period, which, being constituted of Broadway sports, clubmen, rounders, pets of the managers, and friends of the players, was definitely on the low-brow side. Visiting the Rialto with a gleam of cynicism in his professional eye, Percy Hammond wrote back to his home paper, the *Chicago Tribune*, after a Broadway opening, his estimate of such a gathering:

If there was one gleam of human intelligence in all their vapid maps, my eagle and suburban scrutiny failed to observe it. There they sat, an empty, unthinking, overfed, overdrunk, pitiable outfit, slaking their cheap theatrical emotions at a fountain of pink, theatrical piffle.

The new critic of *The Times*, viewing the scene from a nearer vantage point, agreed that the Chicagoan had given "a fairly accurate picture of the average audience at a first night in New York."

His task was to furnish matter that would hold the interest of a Rialto bristling with tribal traditions, taboos, and catchwords, and at the same time reach out for the largely untouched lay public who, if

it read theatrical matter at all, did so merely as a solution of the burning question, "Where'll we go to-night?" He made a tentative start with a Sunday feature of his own invention: "Second Thoughts on First Nights." Before it had run a month Van Anda "knew that I had made no mistake in putting him in."

Therein Woolcott set forth reflectively his opinions of plays and players against a background of broad dramatic knowledge, spicing the seriousness of his treatment with lively anecdotal matter. No one else had done the same thing as well. The column made an instant success and deserved it. Although it was unsigned, Alexander Woolcott became a familiar name on Broadway.

Shortly after his induction the new critic suggested to Van Anda that Brock Pemberton be brought uptown from the *World* and made his assistant, which was done. The two youngsters—Pemberton was but two years Aleck's senior—made a live team.

"They blew through Broadway like a fresh wind, and you can take that 'fresh' whichever way you like," that pre-Algonquin wisecracker, Rennold Wolf, was quoted as saying.

Woolcott's daily critiques were not noteworthy in those early days. They brimmed over with sweetness and light. So enthralled was he by the allurements of this brave, new world that he could not bear to be harsh with the idyllic creatures who peopled it. Never was there a happier inspiration than that of Deems Taylor in suggesting for the title of a Woolcott book *Enchanted Aisles*. For the young commentator of twenty-eight every aisle that sloped downwards to an orchestra seat was, indeed, enchanted, though he partly recovered from this mood later. Walter Winchell thought him soft-hearted, "a banana split" rather than an acidulous censor, and recorded of him (possibly as a vehicle for a long-secreted pun) that "he always praises the first production of each season, being reluctant to stone the first cast." But he also found the Woolcott reviews "always more interesting than any show he covered—including the hits."

Aleck had his favourites. He prostrated himself in perpetual adoration before the genius of Minnie Maddern Fiske, at whose feet he sat to gather notes for a book on her and her philosophy of the drama. He paid unstinted homage to Laurette Taylor, and to the Barrymores, Lionel and John (Ethel came later into the orbit of his praise). Frequently a performance or a performer would inspire him to such bubbling ecstasies of encomium that one of his contemporaries dis-



cribed him as "still scattering posies with such lavishness that his column might have been made up by a symposium of press agents."

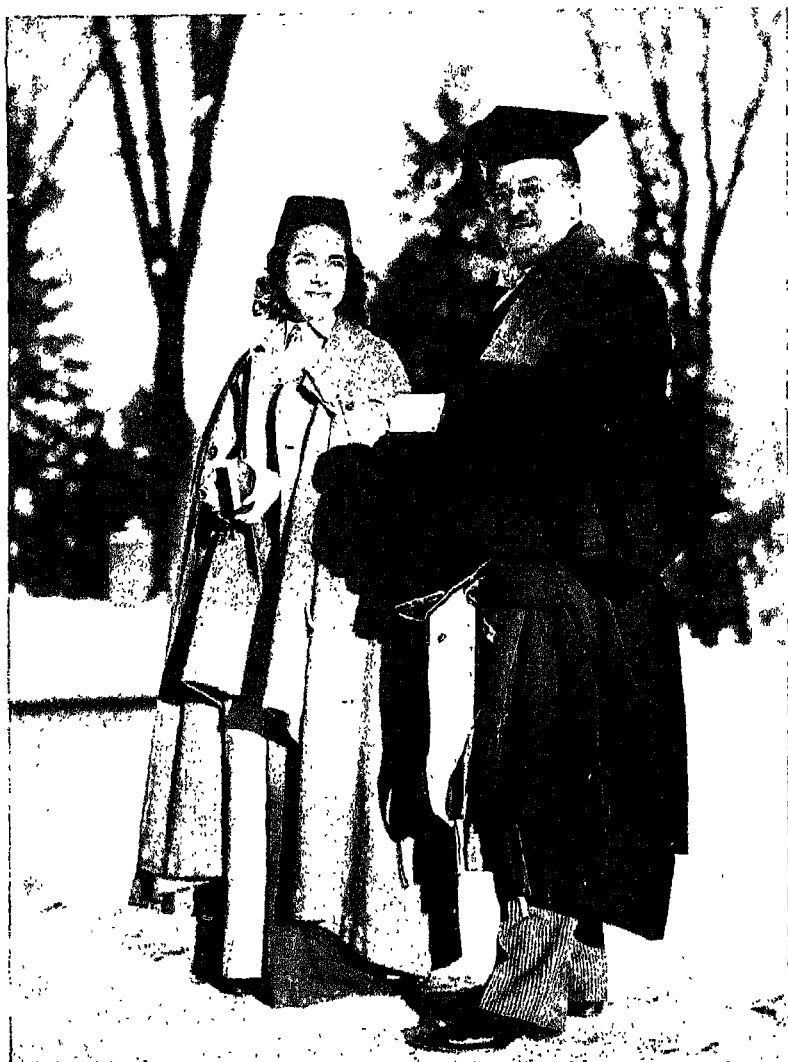
People were reading Woollcott, more people than had ever before read a theatrical column. His office was well satisfied. But it had its troubles with him on another count. As he felt his oats, he began to take liberties, to adventure on the forbidden ground of the risqué. It was a queer kink in the Woollcott character, this same idiosyncrasy which had inspired his ribaldries of the Hamilton campus and won him his proudly flaunted nickname of "Putrid"—the same which was mightily to plague unwary future editors—a coltish itch to attract notice to himself by the sure-fire method of shock. Harold Ross, himself a sufferer from this Woollcottian antic as tried upon *The New Yorker*, stigmatized it as "the literary impulse of a small boy with a piece of chalk before a board fence." Its typical expression was the crypto-pun on familiar four-letter words. The highly respectable *Times* was a peculiarly unsuitable medium for this kind of playfulness.

Aleck's first assault upon the purity of the fit-to-print columns occurred in his review of a breezy, boisterous, and empty comedy in the slapstick category. The critic captioned his article "Farce in a Gale of Wind." An alert proof-reader caught it. A later and lesser offence slipped into print and the perpetrator was called upon the carpet by Van Anda, who produced a pun of his own, terming his protégé "the clowning blunder of my life." Wounded in his hero-worshipping soul, Aleck sulked for a month. Thereafter the copy desk was instructed to read Woollcott with an X-ray.

In the 'teen years of the century, producers, managers, and stars ruled the theatrical roost. Theatre notes were mere adjuncts to press agency. The attitude of the theatre magnate to the newspaper was one of benevolent despotism. He paid for the advertising, didn't he?—an extra rate, at that. Well, then, he proposed to get service for his money. The critic benefited by free tickets: two of the best seats for every opening. Why, then, should he, a fifty- or sixty-dollar-a-week employee, be privileged to impair or imperil a fifty-thousand-dollar investment by the expression of an opinion which might well be rooted in error, captiousness, or mere spite? From the commercial angle, the contention is not without merit. That it would automatically destroy all artistic sincerity and reduce the reviewers to the status of an unpaid clique was no concern of the producers. They were business men, not artists.



HAMILTON, A B



HAMILTON, L.H.D.

When the newspapermen overstepped, cavalier methods were applied. The *Tribune* described a play as "a triumph of vulgarity and dullness." Without delay the opinion was transferred to the billboards, garbled as follows: "A TRIUMPH—The *Tribune*." Theatres banned critics for unfavourable reviews.

A decade before Woolcott's start in dramatic criticism, the issue of independence had been fought out between Klaw and Erlanger, the "bosses of Broadway," and *Life*, then the smartly sophisticate weekly of the famous "Four M'S," Mitchell, Martin, Miller, and Metcalfe. Metcalfe, who covered the theatres, was excluded from all the "combine's" houses because of the frankness of his unfavourable opinions. He thereupon brought suit against the managers, charging conspiracy, but was eventually beaten in the courts. As late as the early 1920's *Vanity Fair* discharged its critic, Dorothy Parker, after some of her typically spirited observations upon current shows, whereupon Robert Sherwood and Robert Benchley, fellow members of the staff, resigned in protest against what they regarded as the magazine's knuckling under to the theatre management. Percy Hammond, head of the powerful *Chicago Tribune's* dramatic department, writing of a show in which there was a preponderance of leg, took pen in hand to "beg to remind the Messrs. Shubert that the human knee is a joint and not an entertainment," whereupon he was shut out of the Shubert theatres. Walter Winchell fell foul of them and was banned for four years, though not with one hundred per cent success, as he put on crepe whiskers and sneaked into the Marx Brothers show on pretence of being their aged uncle.

"A certain columnist," he wrote in reprisal, "has been barred from all Shubert openings. Now he can wait three days and go to their closings."

In general, management appointed itself sole judge of what constituted proper and permissible criticism.

Actors, too, were privileged personages. John Barrymore could command columns of space for a letter of Miltonian grandeur and invective wherein he flayed the critics who had given Sister Ethel less praise than he thought her due. An actor named Steyne sued Heywood Broun for saying that he gave "the worst performance on the contemporary stage," and Broun, commenting upon the actor's next appearance, noted with deceptive urbanity that "Mr. Steyne was not up to his standard." Generally speaking, there was open season for dramatic writers.

Such was the situation when the Shubert Brothers became the leading New York producers. Rising from the obscurity of the men's furnishings trade in Syracuse, N.Y., they had fought the potent Klaw & Erlanger interests to a standstill and acquired a string of houses extending across the country. They were not loved in the profession they ruled. An inkling of why is afforded by the case of Kathleen Clifford. Miss Clifford was under contract with them for four Sunday concerts at the Winter Garden. When she received her pay envelope, it contained only half the stipulated price. She protested but got no satisfaction. She then brought suit. The brothers pleaded that, Sunday concerts being illegal, the contract was void and they owed her nothing at all. The court sustained that contention.

In their attitude towards the press, the Shuberts were no different from other managements. Adverse treatment of a Shubert show brought forth protests verging from the petulant through the contentious to the minatory. The brothers were firm and honest believers in the sanctity of property as exemplified in a New York production.

On the other hand, *The Times* had been growing quietly but steadily more independent. This is not attributable to Woollcott or the dramatic department, which merely reflected an editorial trend. It was due to the journalistic theory and policy of Van Anda, loyally backed by Owner Ochs. Sooner or later it was inevitable that the Shuberts and *The Times* should clash. The two theories came into head-on collision in the spring of 1915, with Alexander Woollcott between them.

The provocation was a play called *Taking Chances*, an adaptation and insufficient bowdlerization of a French farce. As it was a featured production, the first-string critics automatically attended. Woollcott found it "... not vastly amusing ... the resulting product" (of pruning to avoid offending American sensibilities) "is quite absurd ... other moments when a puzzled audience wonders what it is all about."

That will hardly seem severe to a modern reader. But coming from the usually kindly Woollcott (although the Shuberts tried to make him out consistently hostile) it was the more disappointing. Of the other critics, one was favourable, six, following the custom of the day, were carefully noncommittal, and seven besides *The Times* were more or less definitely adverse.

Foresceing a damaging reaction, the Shuberts prepared *before the*

opening and issued in the next day's papers the following advertisement:

### TO THE PUBLIC

Do not believe everything you see in the notices to-day. And though some of the critics, lacking in humour, may try to make you believe that somewhere there is something just a little bit off the line in "Taking Chances," the management is not taking any chances in extending its assurances to you that this impression is decidedly wrong. You will like "Taking Chances" just as the rest of the audience did last night, when the play scored one of the most sensational comedy hits ever known in an American theatre.

THE MANAGEMENT.

This was reckless prophecy. The play was not a hit. It ran to eighty-nine performances and presumably lost money.

Why the resentful brothers should have selected Woollcott as scapegoat is not clear. Being shrewd analysts of trend, they may have sensed *The Times'* increasing independence and figured that to discipline the paper and its critic would be a useful lesson to other newspapers which might be tempted to follow a bad example. The Shuberts decided to serve notice that Alexander Woollcott was no longer acceptable. For the young critic it was a life-and-death crisis. If he could be excluded from the theatres at managerial caprice, his career as a pen-free writer was over. He had no way of knowing, aside from his faith in Van Anda, whether he would be backed or dropped. Faith was all very well, but no daily publication had as yet dared to challenge the mighty and autocratic theatre clique.

The Shuberts opened negotiations on a note of urbanity which was maintained throughout. They requested that some staff member other than Mr. Woollcott be assigned to their next opening at the Maxine Elliott Theatre. *The Times* replied with equal suavity that a first-string show deserved and would get their first-string critic. Meanwhile another house controlled by the Shuberts sent tickets to Mr. Van Anda for the performance there with a notice that they would not be honoured if presented by Mr. Woollcott. The tickets went back by return messenger. Following instructions from his chief, Woollcott purchased tickets at the box office for the Maxine Elliott Theatre opening. Upon presenting them, he was turned away by Jake Shubert and the doorman.

Van Anda elected to fight. He went direct to his principal. Adolph Ochs was a peaceable man. He disliked contention. On minor issues

he would compromise or yield with good-humoured indifference. Van Anda hoped that he would not regard this as minor.

"Do you think Mr. Woolcott's criticism of the play was justified?" was the owner's first question.

"That isn't the point, is it?"

"No. Of course not," said Ochs after reflection. "What do you think we should do?"

"Get an injunction against the Shuberts."

"I'll call up our lawyers. Anything else?"

"Throw out the Shubert advertising."

"Do so."

Broadway goggled over the news, to which *The Times* gave nearly a page of its space, that an injunction against the Shuberts had been granted, restraining them from excluding Alexander Woolcott from their theatres upon his presentation of a ticket regularly bought and paid for. But this was nothing compared to the sensation produced by the paper's second line of offence. For a theatre manager to withdraw or threaten the withdrawal of advertising patronage was a familiar form of discipline. For a newspaper to throw out on its own motion the most prized and highest-paying species of advertising was revolutionary, anarchical.

In its broader implications, the issue would determine the honesty and independence of dramatic criticism in America. As New York went, so, with a few journalistic exceptions, went the nation. Once the principle was established that praise alone would be tolerated, the independent critic would be suppressed, and the others become henchmen and touts for the producers. It is to the discredit of contemporary journalism that the other papers, with a few honourable exceptions, either failed to perceive this or were too timorous—perhaps too jealous of *The Times'* expanding prosperity and power—to support its stand generally and vigorously.

The next review of a Shubert production (from which the brothers were unable to bar the critic), on the whole favourable, was signed, for the first time, Alexander Woolcott. It was *The Times'* method of serving notice upon the Shuberts, Broadway, the profession, and the world at large that it would back its man to the limit. The name appeared but once. It was enough. Park Row and Broadway understood.

Through its news column the paper made the controversy a *cause*

*célèbre* by reporting the court proceedings to the extent of nearly a page. A symposium on dramatic criticism followed in a few days. The most cogent contribution was a flat indictment of the metropolitan press, the writer charging that the low status of the theatrical columns was due to "the notorious failure of the newspapers to stand behind critics better known than Mr. Woolcott."

The Shuberts fought. They carried their case to the Appellate Division and got a reversal. The decision, which is none the less curious for being unanimous, holds in substance that no person may properly be denied admittance to a theatre on the grounds of race (as a negro), creed (as a Mohammedan), or class (as, perhaps, a race-track tout); but that if a theatre-owner objects to an individual on account of his opinions, freckles, or taste in spats, that person may legally be turned away at the door.

Such was the law until a decision of the highest court of the land swept it away in 1944. It was the culmination of an eight-year fight which the Shuberts started by barring Leonard Lyons, columnist of the *New York Post*, for a comment which they deemed objectionable. Advised that the anti-Woolcott decision was valid, Lyons had Morris L. Ernst draw up a bill amending the Civil Rights law (applying to restaurants and hotels) to include theatres. Introduced by Assemblyman Irwin Davidson, the bill was killed in committee, but subsequently passed in 1941. Thereupon the Shuberts tested its constitutionality all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court, whose decision against them established the right of an orderly person to enter any theatre upon purchase of a ticket.

By virtue of the Shuberts' earlier victory, Critic Woolcott was again banned. The immediate effect was to make him the most conspicuous figure in his own line. His space allotment for the "Second Thoughts" was increased to as much as four columns on some Sundays. His salary was jumped to \$100 a week. His by-line appeared regularly. No critic was more frequently quoted on the billboards in display advertising. Producers courted him. Stars welcomed him to their friendship. New Yorkers pointed him out to country cousins in theatre lobbies. He loved it. "Yes," he said to a condoling friend, "they threw me out, and now I'm basking in the fierce white light that beats upon the thrown."

There is no formula for reckoning the dollars-and-cents return upon publicity. But the sensitive Shubert instinct apprised Jake, Lee, and



Sam that the high court had handed them a Pyrrhic victory. *The Times* could get along quite comfortably without the Shubert revenue, but could the Shuberts afford to dispense with the most influential theatre page in town? It took them a year to arrive at the painful conclusion that they had made a mistake.

Again an emissary went to the newspaper. Would the Shubert advertising be accepted? That depended. Would tickets for first nights be received in the spirit in which they were tendered? Yes; on the understanding that they would be honoured when presented by any person designated by the editor. This was agreed to without demur. Woollcott resumed his attendance. The brothers rushed into print with large advertisements welcoming themselves back into the fold. *The Times* made no comment. It has not been suggested by any responsible person that its attitude towards subsequent Shubert productions was in any manner affected.

One creditable feature of the campaign remains to be recorded. On neither side was any personal rancour displayed. The Shuberts, *The Times*, and Woollcott were equally and scrupulously fair.

A friend who had been out of touch with Broadway met Aleck after it was all over.

"How did that scrap with the Shuberts come out?" he asked.

"Oh," said the critic, "that all went up in smoke."

"How do you mean, smoke?"

Aleck grinned. "Jake Shubert sent me a box of cigars for Christmas," said he.

## 7

### THE GLORIES OF WAR

AT twenty-seven years of age, Woollcott had achieved his life's ambition. He was the youngest dramatic critic in the United States, probably the youngest of importance since Edgar Allan Poe. The Shubert campaign gave him unearned notoriety; his own skill and pioneering method, a well-earned reputation. He was a formidable figure on Broadway.

It puffed him up a little. Cornelius Vanderbilt, who went on *The*

*Times* as a police reporter at this period, recalls that some of the younger men called Aleck "God's big brother." Vanderbilt pictures him as "a plump, good-natured cuss, rather showy and gaudy, who liked to hang around late and talk." He liked also to gamble. Tradition still preserves memories of his eloquence in alternately importuning and blaspheming the crap dice. His habitual form of accost was, "I'll match you," at the same time producing a quarter. Or he might let the coin speak for him. One day Tom Ybarra, who had been abroad for several months, ran into him beneath the Sixth Avenue El. No word of greeting was spoken. Aleck dug up a quarter. Tom dug up another. It was tacitly understood that Aleck would match his competitor. He did not.

"Bless you," said Tom, pocketing the two coins.

"Damn you," said Aleck and passed on.

Longing for home atmosphere now beset Aleck. His mother had died, worn out and peacefully willing to go, leaving her youngest-born with the feeling that he could never bear to return to the Phalanx. Julie's marriage was a deplorable failure from a practical viewpoint, and an idyllic success otherwise. The Tabers lived in something very like a tenement, often on insufficient fare, greatly to the distress of the now prosperous Aleck, from whom his sister refused with resolute good humour to accept financial help. Gifts of clothing and hampers of food, however, she could not reject; nevertheless, Aleck fretted over his inability to do more.

Seeing him footloose, Hawley Truax, who was living with his widowed mother in one of the luxurious flats of West Fifty-seventh Street, suggested that he join them, an invitation which he gratefully accepted. Mrs. Truax became a sort of foster-mother to him; his letters to her are full of affection.

So he had a good home, a good job, and brilliant prospects. Every circumstance of his life made for satisfaction. The World War changed it all.

From the first he was "rarin' to go." Nothing in his circumstances opposed his military ambitions. He had discharged his debt to Alexander Humphreys, who refused to accept any interest. His first book, on Mrs. Fiske, was finished and in the press. He was exempt from any responsibilities.

The paper could get along without him. Brock Pemberton was quite competent to take over management of the department. This he did, acting as first-string reviewer also, until a former dramatic critic who

had shifted to the editorial staff, "the discerning John Corbin," as Aleck called him, was brought down from upstairs.

An abortive love affair may have contributed to Aleck's desire for a change of scene. For several years he had been the frequent escort of a girl whom he had met through his Hamilton associations. Amelie Randall, seventeen years old when she and Aleck met in 1912, was an extremely pretty and high-spirited young lady who was as little awed by her admirer's eight-year seniority and his rising reputation as she was by his eccentricities and tantrums. What probably attracted him as much as anything else in her was her blithe refusal to take any nonsense from him and her readiness at all times to stand toe to toe and swap verbal swings and jabs. If he had a richer command of controversial English, she matched it with a better control of temper. The termination of a typical encounter between them might be thus expressed in dramatic formula: Exit Amelie (laughing); Exit Aleck (sulking).

When he became dramatic critic it was Amelie whom he most frequently took to first nights. She may be the basis for a wildly distorted chapter in a spurious and anonymous "life sketch" of Woollcott, wherein he is represented as harbouring a frantic passion for a twelve-year-old girl.

"Frantic passion" would be an exaggerated term to apply to his feelings towards young Amelie, but people who knew them at the time think that he was hard hit when, four years after their meeting, she married a successful surgeon. There is some reason for believing that his disappointment had a lasting emotional effect upon him—or that he so thought.

Only his physique stood between him and military glory. He was fat, flabby, and myopic. But beneath that inauspicious exterior burned a crusading flame. Some way or another he could be of service: some way or another he was bound to get in. No combat unit would look at him twice. He turned his attention to the medical service and by a combination of guile and persistence "blinked his way into the war," as Heywood Brown put it. By way of preparation for foreign service he advertised in the *Courier des États Unis* for "*un Français bavard ou une Française sérieuse*" to teach him the language.

With practically no training he found himself on Governor's Island, one of some hundred and fifty enlisted men, "bouncing undergraduates from Princeton and Rutgers who," so he surmised, "had enlisted early

in May in order to escape the June exams." The officers were chiefly staff men from the Post Graduate Hospital in New York. There was also a consignment of nurses who, during subsequent blackouts, were kept under lock and key by a musical-comedy duenna of rigorous virtue. The assorted lot was loaded aboard an ancient and undeloused fruiter from the Central American trade.

The ship was filthy. It stank of mould and bilge. It was too small for its human cargo. Rats and mice and such small deer ranged between decks. There were spiders in the bunks, beetles in the galleys, and roaches in the soup. As it wallowed across the bay, a tramp freighter rammed and sank it while the rescued soldiery cheered its demise. There were no casualties except to equipment.

This had been something special, contributed by Mrs. Marjorie Post Close, now Mrs. Joseph E. Davies, whose husband at the time was a captain in the unit. She came forward with another \$75,000, which supplied a new outfit to the second ship, a more commodious and seaworthy craft, the *Finland*. Among the specialties provided were life preservers of an intricate and obese design. At the initial boat drill Private Woolcott made his first impression as an individual, not through any merit of his own, but because, as he waddled to his station in the inflated mechanism, a startled officer inquired with insufficiently controlled amazement:

"For God's sake! Who's the pregnant mermaid?"

Socially Private Woolcott was well contented 'twendecks. He considered the enlisted men, on the whole, superior to the officers. Physically, however, he was dissatisfied. The quarters were cramped, and the food was inferior. He hankered after the fleshpots of Egypt. Like that other doughty warrior, Parolles, he fain would "... eat and drink and sleep as soft as captain shall."

Too crafty to complain, he went to a New York acquaintance, Major Edmund Devol, and informed him that if any of the officers wished to improve their knowledge of the French language, Private Woolcott was at their service. While he did not explicitly say so, Dr. Devol got the impression that French was practically his second mother tongue. (When a useful end was to be gained, Aleck was never one to let modesty hamper invention.) From that day he spent most of his time and ate most of his meals with his official betters. As for the lessons, they began academically enough but had a way of drifting off into entertaining monologues by the instructor; anecdotes of stage

celebrities and happenings, racily expressed, but not necessarily in French. Professor Woolcott enjoyed the voyage and took on flesh, which was the last thing he needed. This was his first exhibition of the soldierly virtue of looking after Number One, at which he was to prove an adept.

Some of the superfluous flesh was sweated off him on the day of landing at Saint-Nazaire when the unit marched thirty-five kilometres under a hot August sun to where Base Hospital No. 8 was being formed. Private Woolcott came through, pasty-faced but firm on his feet. There were unsuspected reserves in that slack and gross body.

Savenay loomed to the bloodshot eyes of the exhausted detachment, cool and grey and lovely, "an ancient Breton village of steep, cobbled street, and windmills that turn sleepily against the sunset sky." The first object to appeal to the dehydrated marchers was the town pump. They made for it, only to be surrounded by vehement villagers, shrieking warnings. That water was for washing not drinking. Who ever heard of *drinking* water? If *les Américains* were thirsty, there was *vin ordinaire*, cheap and plentiful. One voluble old lady informed the strangers that she had not tasted water for thirty years and by the grace of *le bon Dieu* hoped never again to taste it. When some of the marchers produced toothbrushes and proceeded to freshen their mouths at the forbidden pump, there was general curiosity and unstinted mirth. The Savenayards had never seen a toothbrush before. For that matter, they had never seen an American before. Schuyler Ladd, who was to become Woolcott's buddy, gives his impression thus:

"They were very glad to welcome us; they felt it marked the turning point of the war. But—we were not *men*. No: we were only boys! We had no moustaches and no hair on our faces and *no stomachs*. And you were not a man unless you had all these."

On better acquaintance the populace, particularly the feminine portion, changed its mind. Stomachs and beards waned in popularity; toothbrushes waxed. But children still came to the town pump to watch the foreigners at their strange bibulations.

Private Woolcott was housed in a stone building, formerly a girls' seminary, and set to keeping records. He hated the job. He was shifted to unloading freight cars. This was better. It hardened his body. His next step was a transfer to the dead-house, where he measured corpses for coffins. This toughened his spirit. Thence he passed to the venercal ward of the hospital. He wrote to Julie, wishing that she might see

him "presiding at night as wardmaster. . . . I had the time of my life." For variety he was on the receiving desk, took a turn at ambulance running, and scouted the country for fresh food.

Uncomplaining service won its reward. Private Woollcott was promoted to sergeant. It was as high as he ever got in the war. It was as high as he wanted to get. The modest recognition proved to him that he could make his way: that he was "regular." The fortitude and endurance he had built up at college through hopeless batterings now paid dividends. He had proved himself in the fundamental virtues. Taping corpses and carrying bedpans to syphilitics are not the stuff of heroic dreams and Congressional Medals, but they served his purpose. He thanked his lucky stars that he was "over here and out of all that"—meaning the peaceful doldrums of Broadway.

The unit was rank with favouritism. The new sergeant watched, without envy, notoriously unfit companions get commissions and "cushy" jobs, through influential kinships or social pull. Secure in the chevrons he had won by hard work, he could laugh at this, which did not prevent his filing it away in a retentive memory. After he had become a metropolitan celebrity, he was called upon to speak at a Savenay Post reunion, where the presiding officer, after having introduced with eulogistic references several of the outfit's petted darlings, all of them officers, came to Sergeant Woollcott, of whom he patronizingly stated that he had twice declined a commission. Up rose the ex-sergeant, twitching perceptibly at the nostrils.

"It's news to me," said he blandly, "that I was ever offered a commission. If I had"—he paused and stared about him—"I couldn't have afforded to pay big money for it"; a contribution to the amenities which was received with more snickers than applause.

"If you feel as sore as that," protested one of his neighbours when he sat down, "I don't see why you came here at all."

"Oh," said Aleck, "I wanted to see Bill Spencer."

Bill Spencer was the company cook.

Nothing could keep Alexander Woollcott out of the limelight for long. Out for an evening walk with Schuyler Ladd, whose performance in the Chinese play, *The Yellow Jacket*, had been a Broadway sensation, he said abruptly:

"Let's give a show."

"What kind of show?"

"A Woollcott-Ladd show. I'll write it and you play the lead."

He outlined the play with such fervour that Ladd caught his enthusiasm, and both returned to the bunkroom, yelling: "Wake up! Wake up! We're going to give a show."

After dodging casual boots, they got the others interested, and secured a number of volunteers who had been in college theatricals. There was no difficulty in "selling" the idea to the higher-ups. Six weeks of rain had dampened the morale of the camp. A play might prove to be the tonic needed. The pioneers received *carte blanche* to commandeer whatever they wanted. One of the mess halls was selected, Ladd set about gathering gunny sacks to sew together for a curtain, and Woollcott went to work at white heat of creation to write his first play.

In the meantime recruits rallied to the enterprise. A scene painter turned up; also an ex-stage hand and a carpenter. Musicians volunteered, including the organist of a metropolitan church. Good material for the female roles was found among the duenna-picketed nurses. The drama, *And Ye Took Me In*, was listed for an opening performance on Hallowe'en, with the organist as musical director and Ladd ("the least actory actor I have ever known," said Woollcott) as star and stage manager. Early rehearsals found all hands full of fire and ambition.

With the dress rehearsal came a dire discovery. The breadth of the building was hopelessly inadequate to the stage, wings, and superior scenery over which the experts had devotedly laboured. There were forty-eight hours to go. In the professional theatre the production would have been postponed for a week or a month and nobody would have thought anything of it.

The professional theatre does not have a murderously bored and amusement-ravenous audience of several thousand potential rioters and mutineers impatiently waiting. Neither does it have a detachment of U.S. Engineers around the corner. Desperate, the Woollcott-Ladd combination recalled the army legend that the engineers can do it whether it can be done or not, even if there isn't time. They yelled for help. An architect materialized, looked over the barracks, studied the stage set, shook his head, organized a squad. The engineers fell upon their own new barracks, happily not quite finished, tore out one end, ran up a stage, roofed it over, installed the scenery, rigged flies, lights, and curtain, and had it ready two hours before the time set. When a magazine got up a post-bellum symposium on America's Most Glorious Achievement in the War, Correspondent Woollcott nominated the building of the Savenay Theatre.

The performance was a smash hit. Unhappily no script of *And Ye Took Me In* has been preserved. It was the author's sole success as a playwright.

So great was the acclaim that the brass-hats arranged an encore in the form of a command performance at the Main Camp Y.M.C.A., where one thousand spectators yelled themselves hoarse over it. Somehow Arthur Hopkins, the producer, heard of it and suggested that he would be receptive towards a full-length Alexander Woolcott play. In jocular vein, the amateur dramatist wrote that when he was mustered out he would have ready for Hopkins a drama called *World Without End*, adding "and then you *will* be ruined." The producer cabled: "Accept play and ruination." When later Woolcott received a clipping from a New York column, stating that Hopkins had accepted the play, unread, he felt that this was carrying matters too far, but half-decided "to spoil the joke by writing the play, after all. It is all in my mind." There it remained, unborn.

After the excitement of *And Ye Took Me In* was over, the dramatist lapsed into depression. He began to lose weight. His stomach was deranged; his eyes became almost useless. The record economically notes that Sergeant Woolcott was "sk. in hospital." Worried about him, his friend Major Devol suggested that he apply for his discharge on the ground of disability, a procedure his condition fully justified. The invalid wrathfully rejected the opportunity. What about a transfer, then? No: he would not even ask that. His business in that war, as he saw it, was to stay where he was put and do what he was told. There are worse conceptions of a soldier's duty.

Out of hospital, he got a furlough, went up to Paris, met a lot of friends, had a high old time, and came back a good deal restored in spirit, though still yearning for action. He was further cheered by a visit from Heywood Brown and his wife, Ruth Hale, who had come to Savenay to see him. They got the impression that he was dissatisfied, restless with the desire to play a more active part in the war. He wrote to Ruth Hale that he had come to hate "this ignobling enterprise." He did not think that it much mattered "what happens to my dirty little soul," but he was rotting with inaction.

In that spring of 1918, *Stars and Stripes*, a weekly newspaper by enlisted men for enlisted men, was getting under way. Difficulties in gathering a staff were caused by the opposition of company commanders who, when privates or noncoms were requisitioned from the Paris



office, refused to release them. Thereupon the officers who commanded the editorial department, although not officially part of it, got the publication transferred to the General Staff, which gave it precedence. Any requisition from this quarter had the higher authority back of it; it was a command. Alexander Woollcott was thus drafted.

At first he was suspicious. He did not believe that the new duty would bring him any nearer than the old to the action his soul craved. But it was a change and therefore welcome. He gave a farewell dinner at Mme Cocaud's *bivette* (he subsequently immortalized the restaurant in print, and the proprietress by naming a cherished poodle after her), packed his kit-bag with all that it would hold, auctioned off the overflow at an uproarious and ribald sale, bade farewell to the town pump and revolving windmills of Savenay, and terminated as grinding an apprenticeship as ever was served by an enlisted man. He was hopefully exchanging, as he told his buddies, "stink for ink and the bedpan for the typewriter."

## 8

## ACTION

ANYTHING was better than Savenay, from the Woollcott viewpoint. Nevertheless, he was at first dubious of his prospects. He thought *Stars and Stripes* probably just another propaganda branch. Aleck did not like propaganda. The morale pap dished out to the soldiery by sundry well-meaning agencies turned him queasy. His first question was whether there was any chance of seeing action. When told that the staff had passes admitting them to all fronts, and that the policy of the paper was to give the men in the trenches what they wanted, he felt better.

*Stars and Stripes* was a unique publication. There were for a time a few officers on the staff; Franklin P. Adams, for whom Aleck conceived, on better acquaintance, a vast admiration ("the great F.P.A. whom I like no end"), and Grantland Rice, the top-notch sports-writer, among them. The indestructible democracy of the news room prevailed over

military etiquette with them and a few others. Officers and men ate and bunked together.

One night I slept on a  
Terribly full cot,  
My partner being  
Alexander Woollcott,

wrote Captain Adams, inscribing a book to the medical sergeant.

The officers were but ephemeral. The staff soon sloughed them off and got down to its basis of enlisted men only. Over them but not of them were Captain Guy T. Visknisski, in the editorial department, and Captain Richard H. Waldo, an able and experienced graduate of Park Row on the business side. The working staff was made up of Harold W. Ross—the best editor in America, in Woollcott's opinion—John T. Winterich—the best copy man in the world, in Ross's opinion—Hudson R. Hawley, Woollcott, the artists, C. LeRoy Baldrige and A. A. Wallgren, with a young sergeant, Seth Bailey, who paralleled *Dere Mable* with some lively trench vernacular contributions to which he was allowed to sign his initials, a privilege not accorded Woollcott. No daily in America had ever boasted a city room of such high average quality.

Though an expert newsman, Captain Visknisski brought to the assignment desk the aura of militarism. He was a conscientious disciplinarian. He put Ross under arrest for being scooped by the Paris edition of the *Herald*. He issued orders instead of assignments. The staff became fretful. Ross spent time in saluting which might more usefully have been devoted to editorial matters. Presently there came a day when the paper must be made up, Ross was laid by the heels for some dereliction, and Winterich, the only other man with the requisite knowledge, was away. After several painful hours with the make-up sheet, Visknisski decided that the military code was not adaptable to journalism, and turned over to the underlings the business of getting out the paper.

Thenceforth *Stars and Stripes* was run on so ultra-democratic a basis that it was practically a soviet. The staff held an organization meeting and chose Ross as chief.

"All right," said he. "I'll take it. But get this, you fellows. What I say goes. We'll hold weekly meetings and you can fire me if you don't like my way of running the paper. But while I'm in, I'm boss."

It worked. Ross was never superseded. He got out the kind of paper the men at the front wanted. Woollcott was soon his star reporter. It was better than the hospital, but it was still not good enough for Aleck's restless ambitions. So eager was he to get into action that he applied to be attached to a field hospital as medical sergeant, thinking to combine his technical experience with his new duties as correspondent. Nothing came of it. He complained that he hadn't joined the army for a picnic.

In the early days the work did have a picnic quality. Every weekend the whole force piled into the cars bearing the General Staff insignia and made a festal excursion to the not-very-active front. As circulation increased, and work with it, the tasks were split up. When the hard fighting moved to the Argonne, Woollcott became officially "our correspondent at the front." Ross preserves a mental picture of "a human owl in sergeant's stripes, trundling along in some exposed spot amidst calls of warning and shouts of 'Get the hell out of there!'—his only armament a pass entitling him to visit all fronts."

Correspondent Woollcott had won the post of honour—and no little danger—by his ability to deliver the sort of journalistic goods for which the market was waiting. These articles of his, usually in the first column, sometimes "boxed" to lend them greater importance, were overstrained, superheroidal, even sophomoric; not at all the stuff of enduring literature. But Sergeant Woollcott was not writing for the ages. He was writing for a weary, dirty, cootie-bitten, news-famished, homesick enlisted man in a foul trench, and he knew better than any other penman in the war just what that man wanted. The following is what one enlisted man thought of the "stuff" a decade later:

Then we'd get hold of a copy of the *S & S* and you'd have a bit in it that would sell us on the idea it was all glorious and glamorous. God knows, you weren't fooled, yourself, but, man, you did a piece of work! And if any other bird aspires to the title of Salesman Supreme, let me see him sell the idea to a lot of disillusioned, lousy, hungry, filthy, war-crazed men with that awful stench in their nostrils that war is glorious—and he's in your class.

His lust for action must have been rabid indeed if it was not appeased by his press experiences. He seems to have been indifferent to, or perhaps not keenly perceptive of, peril. One colleague ascribes this to his nearsightedness: he could not see a shell coming in time to manoeuvre his ponderous and gravid form into safety. For example:

. . . the road ahead of us was being shelled and the chauffeur could see this plainly and to our intense alarm. Woolcott said nothing about it, however, and neither did the chauffeur or I, figuring (as we realized on subsequent comparing of emotions) that we'd be damned if we said anything about stopping until he did. We got into Thiaccourt all right, and got out of it all right. We walked out because, after we got in, an officer sent our car back, it being conspicuous and things being too hot. He asked why the hell we'd taken a chance on driving into the place and Aleck explained that he hadn't seen any shelling. It was then that we realized that he hadn't known about it. After that, I made up my mind what was to be done when travelling with Aleck. His other associates did likewise.

This seems to me to ignore one salient point. Aleck may have had imperfect vision, but his hearing was unimpaired. By all accounts, an approaching and exploding shell makes quite a noticeable commotion. He could hardly have been totally ignorant of what was going on about him.

He was a notable, if slightly ludicrous, figure as he made his rounds. Somewhere he had found or "claimed," soldier fashion, a capacious and gaudy sheepskin garment left behind by a hastily departing German general. It fitted—as nearly as anything ever fitted—his peculiar figure and was warm and comfortable. Thus clad, he went out in the special car which, bearing the insignia of the General Staff, was always a cynosure for curious eyes. His editorial chief recalls this episode of one of their news-hunting trips:

On this occasion he met a major who had been with his old medical unit, which had wound up at a base hospital and was now transferred to the front. Woolcott was so excited about this that he ignored the 155 shells—big bastards—that were coming over every four minutes, and devoted himself to feverish reminiscence. He would try to get down on his belly when he actually heard the whistle of the shell. I would dive flat on the ground like a base-runner sliding for second and then look back at Aleck and his major. The major and Aleck would be getting to the ground, a knee at a time, like a descending camel. They never got further than their knees by the time the shell burst. The major was as fat as Aleck. Aleck kept talking about the old days at Savenay without pause. . . . He would throw one of his fits of effervescent enthusiasm right in the middle of everything, and forget all about the war.

Legend clustered about him. Heywood Broun, in one of his columnar contributions to the *World-Telegram*, quotes William Slaven McNutt to this effect:

All hell had broken loose in a valley just below us and I was taking cover in a ditch as Aleck and Arthur Ruhl (*Collier's Weekly* war correspondent) ambled briskly past me on their way into action. Aleck had a frying pan strapped around his waist, and an old grey shawl across his shoulders. Whenever it was necessary to duck from a burst of shellfire, Aleck would place the shawl carefully in the middle of the road and sit on it. In another quarter of a mile we would be in the thick of it. I saw that Ruhl and Aleck were having a terrific argument, and so I managed to catch up to find out what men would quarrel about at such a moment. Suddenly we all had to fall flat, but while still reclining on his belly Woolcott turned and said, "I never heard anything so preposterous. To me Maude Adams as Peter Pan was gay and spirited and altogether charming as the silver star on top of the tree on Christmas morning."

Fat though he was, and soft though he looked, Sergeant Woolcott was hardy. In the cold nights of December, he could roll up in a single blanket anywhere and sleep profoundly. This was fortunate for him, as he developed a habit of giving away his extra equipment to anyone, soldier or civilian, who was in worse case than himself.

On the other hand, he soon learned that primary lesson of expert soldiering, care of his invaluable self. Late one night he stumbled into a ruined church that had been appropriated by a medical unit. Sergeant Woolcott asked the head nurse for permission to sleep there and, having received it, stretched himself gratefully in the straw at the end of a line of casualties. He was awakened by the delicious smell of tobacco. A small consignment of cigarettes, precious beyond rubies, was being charily apportioned by one of the nurses under the supervision of the head. He heard the ominous direction: "For the wounded only."

Aleck had no wound. But he had a nimble wit. As the nurse bent over him, looking doubtfully for his bandage, he opened glazed eyes, raised a fluttering hand, and uttered a groan that would have done credit to one *in extremis*. The next moment he was contentedly inhaling the worst-needed smoke of his life.

Out of these daily experiences he wove the high-coloured fabric of his *Stars and Stripes* reports, afterwards gathering them into a book which he dedicated to his friend Schuyler Ladd. *The Command Is Forward* is one long whoop of glory. Everything he saw is presented and illuminated in the glow of his exaggerated emotions. Every figure he celebrates is a combination of Hector, Bayard, Richard Occur-de-Lion, George Washington, and Florence Nightingale. He lavished his heroics impartially upon the doughboy in the trenches, the nurse in her

ward, the telephone man rigging his wires under shellfire, the curé sticking to his shattered hamlet, a cook, a teamster, a general, a village mayor, Father Duffy, "Wild Bill" Donovan, the Lost Battalion, and a mongrel bitch who refused to abandon her platoon. It was all in the superlative mood, all under high pressure, but it was saved by its utter sincerity. Woollcott more than believed every word he wrote: he felt it.

He was the least military figure in the A.E.F. His uniform, soiled, sagging, and corrugated with unexpected bulges, looked as if it had just emerged from the delousing plant. His carriage was grotesque. He had the air of submitting to drill in a spirit of tolerance rather than from any recognition of authority or respect for discipline. He hated M.P.s and resented shoulder-strap superiority. To be sure, he possessed certain compensating virtues, but they were not of the obviously soldierly kind. He had courage, hardihood, endurance, self-reliance, enterprisc, a burning enthusiasm for the service, and an unflagging willingness to do more than his share. Useful as these qualities may be in the field, they do not commend themselves to brass-hattery as do a straight back and a snappy salute. Sergeant Woollcott would hardly have won a commission had the war lasted twenty years.

He was extremely jealous of his military status. Burnet Hershey of the *Sun* published an inoffensive reference to him, "discovering over a vermouthe cassis that the pen is mightier than the sword," and was never forgiven for what the subject deemed a reflection upon his valour. When Elsie Janis, the doughboy's favourite entertainer, came to Paris with her mother, Aleck took them to dinner. News of the broadening of the draft had just appeared. Mrs. Janis innocently asked:

"That means that you'll go into the army, doesn't it, Aleck?"—which ruined the dinner for the humiliated host.

When in Paris, Aleck lived high. His special haunts were Nini's (Au Vieux Châlet) on the Butte de Montmartre, the Café Napolitain where he stood drinks to all comers and held forth oracularly to all listeners in French and English, and the Corneille near the Odeon on the Left Bank where there was a convivial poker game with Lee Wilson Dodd, Wythe Williams, Stephen Early, Walter Duranty, and Paul West, as well as the *Stars and Stripes* crowd.

At the newspaper office one day he astounded his comrades by appearing in a neat, new, and correctly fitting uniform. What was the answer? they demanded. Was it a girl? He admitted it. What kind of girl? An American girl. A nice girl? Yes; a nice girl whom he was

about to meet at the train, and (employing the free speech of his kind) they could wipe the goddam apish grins from their goddam lecherous faces, if they coveted the privilege of meeting her. If they would undertake to act like gentlemen—which, God knows, they weren't—he would bring her around to Nini's. Assured of their discreet behaviour, he appeared with Jane Grant, his former associate on *The Times*, now with the Motion Picture Bureau of the Y.M.C.A. Being young and pretty, she was received with enthusiasm as a distinct boon to a city suffering from a dearth of her kind: rather too much enthusiasm, in fact, to please her escort.

In the old *Times* days, the rising Mr. Woollcott had paid some slight and rather patronizing attention to the eighteen-year-old scrub reporter of the society page, and had once or twice taken her to the dances organized by a coterie of young Hamilton College graduates in New York. Now he became extremely attentive. By pulling wires he got her transferred to the Y.M.C.A. Entertainment Corps as a singer—which, fortunately for her, she authentically was. She was assigned to a Unit of Three in which Schuyler Ladd was playing and which Aleck had helped to organize. Thus the two saw each other frequently.

Presently he was talking marriage. It was mostly in a tone of banter, but at times he became earnest and seemed to be trying to persuade himself as well as the girl that they might make a go of it, for a time, anyway—and how about taking a chance? Not being certain how far he meant it, and, in any case, not being interested, she laughed it off. Some of his friends thought that she treated the whole affair in a spirit of levity and that Aleck was cruelly hurt. It is a fair guess that she was puzzled and embarrassed by the anomalous episode, and may have seemed cruel without meaning to be so. He never quite forgave her, and when she married Harold Ross, there was a substratum of hostility, even though all three joined in a housekeeping partnership in New York.

Since a sergeant's pay does not run to luxurious living, he was generally broke. When his poverty became acute, he would dash off an article for the *Red Cross Magazine*, take it around to the Paris office, and sit patiently on the steps until it was read and paid for. Though the publication's financial policy was liberal, the proceeds never lasted long.

A more ambitious venture was a disappointment. Aleck had observed with admiration and envy Harold Ross's first project in the outer world of publication when he gathered a vast accumulation of clippings from

many sources intended for *Stars and Stripes* but rejected by Captain Viskniski, and with pastepot and scissors compounded a booklet called *Yank Talk*. This he turned over to the amateur publishing firm of Ryder & Carroll, headed by Melvin Ryder, not the publisher of *Army Times*. Acquiring a pair of stray printers and a fount of French type, they formed the Lafayette Publishing Company.

As the fount lacked quotation marks, the publishers borrowed these useful punctuations from the *London Daily Mail* for the few hours each day when they were not needed by the owners. Back and forth across Paris the loan was rushed daily in taxicabs, thus becoming probably the most motile bits of type in the history of modern printing.

The compiler cleared between three and four thousand dollars on his *Yank Talk*. If Ross could do this, Aleck asked himself, why shouldn't he? Enlisting the artistry of Baldridge, he turned out a factually illustrated booklet with the title, *Château-Thierry: A Friendly Guide for American Pilgrims*. The scheme was a loss. Copies of the publication would doubtless fetch a fancy price in the bibliophile market to-day.

Another Woolcott opus came into the hands of the Lafayette Publishing Company when Ryder bought the European rights of *Words Mean Nothing*, a one-act skit in which Jane Grant starred with a Y.M.C.A. dramatic unit. Both she and Ryder remember it as a spirited and ingenious bit of amusement. Somehow the manuscript was shunted aside, came back to America together with a miscellany of literary scraps, and turned up after Ryder had forgotten all about it. He wrote to the author, asking permission to publish it over here. Aleck said no; he didn't wish it published; in fact, the basic idea was not original with him but one that he had appropriated from a Lambs Club playlet; please send it back to him. Ryder did so. No copy has since been found.

Alexander Woolcott saw the war as through an opera glass, brightly. It was a show, a big show, *the* big show, a superb production on the grand scale. The critic in him continuously and fervently applauded. As a participant he did not overrate his role. No correspondent was less prone to first-person heroics. But his military service was, I am satisfied, the high spot of his career, in his own estimation. Here he lived on the summit. He identified himself with the major realities. To him the experience was life at its most vivid, infinitely significant, infinitely romantic. As Sergeant-Correspondent Woolcott of *Stars and Stripes*, he was more than happy; he was exultant.



Much as he loved to have been part of the mighty adventure, he never abated an iota of his resentment against brass-battery and the cankering disciplinary regimen of an exaggerated militarism. After his return to America a fellow sergeant asked him about a specially obnoxious old autocrat under whose exactions they had suffered at the front.

"That old so-and-so?" said Aleck. "He's happy. He's just where he belongs."

"Where's that?"

"With a reconstruction outfit, teaching armless veterans to salute with their feet," said Aleck.

Walter Winchell recounts a conversation between two of Woolcott's associates after the Armistice was announced.

"Where was Aleck while we were celebrating?" asked one.

"Probably in a corner, crying his eyes out," said the other.

## 9

### BACK TO BROADWAY

THE soldier came home from the wars, uncertain of his status. He need not have been. Broadway forgets quickly, but astute managing editors do not drop valuable staff members. Scholarly John Corbin, transferred from *The Times* editorial page to keep Woolcott's place warm, now returned "upstairs." Meantime F.P.A., who had been mustered out before Woolcott, had kept his *Stars and Stripes* comrade in the public eye by frequent mention in his widely read "Conning Tower," a service for which Aleck, ever sensitive to the advantages of publicity, was grateful. There came to the dramatic department about this time as assistant a dark, dour, self-effacing young man named George S. Kaufman, who was later to contribute a pungent stage portraiture to his chief's notoriety.

Impecuniosity was the caste mark of the demobilized soldier. Aleck was no exception. With a job awaiting him, he would not normally have let this condition bother him too much. But there were debts. Moreover, he had assumed responsibilities in France which, from vague

references, his friends judged to be quasi-parental. Al Getman, whom he looked up as soon as he landed, thought he was financially worried.

Getman had married. The young couple were in funds, and Aleck borrowed a considerable sum from them—either three or four thousand dollars, Mrs. Getman is not sure which. Except for the magnitude of the amount, this was nothing out of the ordinary. All their lives, the two college mates made loans to one another.

After a brief stay at the City Club, the restored civilian returned to the Truax apartment and settled back into harness in August 1919. Almost at once he sold two war articles to magazines for \$500 apiece, which relieved his doubts as to his earning capacity outside his modest *Times* salary. Within a year the entire Getman loan was repaid.

The two magazine articles were merged with a selection of his *Stars and Stripes* contributions to make up the volume of war pieces, *The Command Is Forward*. It caused no stir in the book world.

"Those first editions of yours, Aleck," prophesied his admiring friend, Alex Osborn, who still saw in him a coming Dr. Johnson, "are going to be worth a lot of money some day."

"Don't fool yourself," was the sour response. "Nothing is rarer than a Shakespeare first except a Woolcott second."

That psychological and social maladjustment so common among demobilized soldiers afflicted and bewildered him. A civilian world at first seemed unreal. When a second World War was engrossing his attention, he remembered in a letter to Thornton Wilder "how dim and, when brought to my attention at all, how distasteful all my civilian friends seemed. When compared with the men who slept in the adjoining bunks on the transport or stood in front of or behind me in mess line, the oldest and dearest friends I had back home seemed like paper dolls."

If, as he complained at the time, he went back to his *Times* job in "a sort of fog of the soul," his output does not show it. Soon after his resumption of duties, the dramatic writers were faced with a situation, itself the most dramatic and tumultuous in modern stage history, when the theatrical profession was rent from top to bottom and crossways by a revolutionary schism.

Equity (the Actors Equity Association) had made certain demands upon the theatre magnates as represented by the Producing Managers Association, and been turned down. In the light of to-day's standards, the demands do not seem excessive; the gist of them was pay, for

rehearsals after the first three weeks and for extra performances beyond eight a week. The manager's reply was: "Can't afford it." The actors suggested arbitration. The producers had "nothing to arbitrate." Equity, three thousand strong from a nucleus of one hundred and twelve six years before, joined the American Federation of Labour, called a strike, added to their demands recognition of Equity and collective bargaining, and picketed the "combine's" theatres.

There was hell to pay on the Rialto. Through their press agents, the P.M.A. denounced the strikers as irresponsible agitators, unrepresentative outsiders, and their supporters as anarchists and outlaws. Pickets were arrested. One hundred and eighty-four actors were sued by the P.M.A. for half a million dollars. Full-page advertisements pledging a fight to the finish were published by the theatre combination in all the papers. As a backfire, the Actors Fidelity League was hastily organized, with many stars and featured actors in its roster. George M. Cohan, weeping copiously, resigned from the Friars and the Lambs clubs, and swore that if Equity won he would never again produce a play. William A. Brady followed suit. David Belasco took the same non-binding oath, remarking, *sotto voce*, that it meant little, since Equity couldn't possibly hold out more than a fortnight, bereft of the pay envelope. Frank Bacon, who, out of sheer loyalty, had closed his own successful show, *Lightnin'*, inquired in rebuttal:

"If actors can rehearse twelve weeks without pay, what's to stop them remaining on strike twelve weeks without pay?"

The query had special pertinence, since a musical show on the Pacific Coast had been cancelled in the thirteenth week of unsalaried rehearsals, leaving the hapless performers to walk back to Broadway.

The lower ranks of the profession rallied to Equity, swelling its membership to eight thousand. It was led by such irresponsible agitators and unrepresentative outsiders as Francis Wilson, John Drew, DeWolf Hopper, Laurette Taylor, Ed Wynn, the Barrymores, Ethel, John, and Lionel, Holbrook Blinn, Helen Ford, Blanche Ring, John Charles Thomas, and the Duncan Sisters, and supported morally and with contributions by those notorious anarchists, Vincent Astor and Mortimer Schiff. Frank Case contributed a thousand dollars and free headquarters in his Algonquin.

New York now enjoyed the most elaborate free show in its history. Two hundred and fifty chorus girls invaded Wall Street and put on a combination rally and beauty exhibition. There was a giant parade

from Columbus Circle to Madison Square. Ed Wynn performed street-corner stunts before delighted throngs, "to lighten the gloom." Ethel Barrymore proved so effective on a soapbox that the political managers of three parties solicited her aid in the coming campaign. Thousands of potential customers stayed away from the theatre because it was more fun to range Broadway and watch for what might be coming and usually did come.

The managers fought back gallantly. Shows were presented with doubles and understudies. Managers, themselves, greased up and went on. One theatre doggedly continued as a one-piece orchestra (piano) vaudeville.

Strategy of the contest on both sides went well beyond the arts of gentle persuasion. Equity sent out "goon squads" composed of young and attractive female members who were assigned to the P.M.A. theatres with instructions to make nuisances of themselves. Having bought tickets and entered a theatre, the group would begin by coughing, hawking, sneezing, and dropping compacts and other personal gadgets on the floor. The next step was to exchange opinions on the show in accents only too audible to the harassed performers.

"Lousy!"

"Awful!"

"Did you ever see such mugging in your life?"

"The house must be paper. Nobody'd pay real money for a show like this."

"You never can tell. There's one born every minute."

Ejected from one theatre, the disturbers would go on to the next and repeat.

Equity spies infiltrated into the meetings of the Actors Fidelity, promptly dubbed "Fidos." Louis Mann delivered an impassioned address on this text at their headquarters in the Hotel Vanderbilt.

"Equity is calling us Fidos. I accept the name. I glory in it. We are proud to be called Fidos. The dog is humanity's best friend, faithful, loyal, and ever true."

"Yes," agreed a hoarse, coarse Equity voice from the rear, "but he's still a son-of-a-bitch."

When the strikers secured Hammerstein's Opera House at Lexington Avenue and 52nd Street, the managers evolved a plan to abrogate the contract. They complained to the Fire Department that the actors were smoking backstage. This was an almost universal practice, though a

technical violation of the law for which the theatre could be closed. An extra force of watchers was assigned to the Opera House. Thereupon the Equity volunteered a special show to be put on at the local firehouse benefit, including its most distinguished talent, an offer accepted with fervour. After that the actors could have used incendiary bombs for cigarette lighters with impunity.

Starring Ed Wynn for the first time, the Shuberts had a smash hit. When Wynn loyally obeyed Equity's call, the management slapped an injunction upon him. He was forbidden to appear upon any non-Shubert stage. There was nothing to prevent his sidewalk appearances mentioned above. But Equity wanted more than that of him.

They planted him in a stage box at Hammerstein's. Halfway through the show a spotlight was thrown upon the box. Wynn arose and announced:

"The Shuberts will not permit me a stage appearance in my act. But if they had allowed one this is what I was going to do."

He then went into and through his monologue.

Though the managers hung together officially there were several whose sympathies were with the striking actors. *Apple Blossoms*, a Charles Dillingham production in rehearsal at the Globe, was called out.

"All right," said Dillingham. "I get the point. Report back when it's over."

He had a huge streamer-sign painted and stretched across the façade of the theatre, BELGIUM. Broadway needed no translation to apprise it that Dillingham was proclaiming his neutrality.

Al Woods found his Eltinge Theatre picketed by a detachment of Equity girls, shivering and bedraggled in a driving rainstorm.

"Hello, kids," said he. "Where's your galoshes? You'll catch cold."

Fifteen minutes later a theatre employee was distributing overshoes to the grateful pickets.

Show after show was called out. Night after night, one more blotch of darkness punctuated the radiance of the district.

When the stage hands and the musicians walked out, the game was up. An amateur scene-shifter, however high and loyal his intent, can wreak disaster, and understudies for the French horn are not to be picked up on the nearest corner. By the last week in August only two P.M.A. theatres were holding out. By September 1, Broadway had lost two million dollars.

Meantime two theatres leased by Equity for benefit performances overflowed nightly. The P.M.A. showed signs of weakening. It suggested pay after four weeks' rehearsal, five for musicals. As for recognition of the union—never, never, never! Equity stood pat.

Through his department in the *Evening Mail*, Burns Mantle, who wielded strong influence because he held himself aloof from personal contacts and was known to be immune to pressure, was advocating a compromise and a joint committee of conciliation headed by Ethel Barrymore for the actors and George M. Cohan for the managers. Apostles of moderation in both camps lent support.

We got the compromise [writes Mr. Mantle], which was inevitable from the time the managers discovered that nobody loves a rich man, and certainly not a rich man who raises the price of theatre tickets whenever he has a hit.

Though the newspapers politely called it a compromise, it barely saved face for the managers. Equity won recognition and all its basic demands. Did Messrs. Cohan, Brady, and Belasco thereupon fold their mantles about them and proudly withdraw from the shameful scene? They did not. Nobody ever does.

Where stood Alexander Woolcott in the titanic struggle? He lurked, secluded like the cuttlefish, in clouds of his own ink. In his Sunday column of commentary he ranged the firmament. He wrote of Dickens and dogs and murders, of Gilbert and Sullivan, of the Phalanx, of Hamilton College, of Shakespeare and the musical glasses, of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings. But not of the strike that was convulsing his special world.

It could not have been from lack of interest or of partisanship. No one who knew Alexander Woolcott could doubt where his sympathies would lie. The Phalanx training and tradition had given him a bias for the underdog, right or wrong. There could be no doubt that Equity was fighting against very real injustice and oppression, whatever one might think of their methods. But the critic must have been painfully pulled in two directions. The object of his respectful adoration, Minnie Maddern Fiske, being married to a manager, was ardently on that side. so was Otis Skinner, whom Aleck warmly admired, and many other actors and actresses who carried weight with him. Against these would be balanced the Barrymores, Laurette Taylor, his old high-school mate, Ed (Leopold) Wynn, and his natural predilections.

He took it out in extravagant praise of Equity shows, couched in such fulsome language as to elicit jeers from the sardonic George Jean Nathan, who, at the time, was specializing in literary jabs at his fellow critics.

It did not satisfy the Woollcott conscience; he was unhappy about it afterwards. Why, then, did he remain on the controversial sidelines? Some of his confrères believed him to have acted under orders from headquarters. I doubt this. Van Anda declares specifically that there were no directions or even suggestions issued. Aleck, himself, once told me that the paper left him absolutely free in all matters of opinion.

It is, however, more than possible that he was actuated by loyalty to the high command. To charge *The Times* with being anti-labour would be extreme; in a dispute between employer and employee, however, its sympathies and policies would normally be with the former, although in the Equity fight it took no side editorially and its news reports were scrupulously neutral. Aleck well knew *The Times'* editorial bent. He had already involved the paper in one costly fight and had been loyally supported where many another critic would have been dropped like a hot potato—and he was a very hot potato in the Shubert row. The Shuberts were leading figures in the present ruction. He might reasonably have shrunk from another battle with them, though he was certainly not of a battle-shirking disposition. That he owed every consideration to his paper is obvious. What more likely than that he should for once submerge his own prejudices and adopt a hands-off programme in tacit deference to the unexpressed but logically assumed wishes of Messrs. Ochs and Van Anda? Few denizens of Broadway breathed a deeper sigh of relief than Alexander Woollcott when it was all over.

The enhanced value the Woollcott method gave to the stage considered as news brought about a change in the Sunday make-up. Hitherto the drama page had been relegated to an inferior position, back of Society, which enjoyed a very capital S, and Automobiles, which contributed heavily to advertising revenue. Now, with the Woollcott matter in a box under title and signature, it moved forward. The daily critiques, too, improved their position, frequently appearing in the place of honour "opposite editorial." These marks of recognition could hardly have failed to confirm his confidence in himself. One result was that he began to get tough. Dramatic criticism, he now per-

ceived, erred on the side of a pervading saccharinity. Of his compères—and inferentially of his former and sweeter self—he wrote:<sup>1</sup>

Unbridled enthusiasm, incredible elasticity, and tumultuous overpraise are distinguishing marks of the whole platoon. The dramatic critics of New York, ranging as they do from the late twenties to the early eighties, and extraordinarily varied in their origins, education, intelligence, and personal beauty, are alike in one respect. They are all be-trousered Pollyannas.

This lie ascribes partly to ignorance or timidity with an occasional "faint odour of corruption," but for the most part

. . . the explanation is simpler and less discreditable; the critic waxes eloquent over mediocrity because he sees so much that is abysmally bad and only he knows how bad a play can be.

The American stage was, indeed, in a parlous state. Neither expert selectiveness nor artistic conscience was to be looked for among the big producers. Hamilton Owens, then writing dramatic criticism for the *Press*, thinks that in this century the theatre has not sunk to so low a level as in the early 'twenties. An anonymous Cassandra wailed in the *Globe*: "Broadway is awash with bilge from the sinking ship, Thespis."

The war had smothered those hopeful germinations, the Neighbourhood Playhouse, the Washington Square Players, and the Provincetown group, which among them had produced O'Neill, Millay, Glaspell, John Reed, Chekhov, and St. John Ervine. With stronger financial backing, the Theatre Guild had emerged from its ashes and was the one bright spot in the picture. Infrequent and fortuitous exceptions aside, the rest was, as the *Globe* writer stated, bilge.

Viewing this scene with displeasure, Critic Woolcott testified to a change of heart. Though broader in his treatment than his contemporaries, he had still been too much preoccupied with Broadway as audience. Now:

. . . it might be pointed out that the review of a play as it appears in the morning newspapers is addressed not to the actors nor to the playwrights, but to the potential playgoer, that the dramatic critic's function is somewhat akin to that of the attendant at some Florentine court whose uneasy business was to taste each dish before it was fed to anyone that mattered. He is an inkstained wretch, invited to each new play and expected, in the little hour that is left him after the fall of the curtain, to transmit something of that play's flavour, to write, with whatever of fond tribute, sharp invective, or amiable badinage will best express it, a description of the play as performed, in terms of the impression it made upon himself.

<sup>1</sup> *Shouts and Murmurs*.



That, I submit, is the blueprint of a responsible and conscientious workman.

One salutary sequel to his new profession of faith was that he ceased to pull his punches. He injected some acid into his ink. It fell short of the "venom from contented rattlesnakes" attributed to Percy Hammond. But it carried a sting of its own, peculiarly exasperating to its victims. He amassed a creditable collection of enmities. Someone in the Lambs gave him the soubriquet "First Grave Digger." Examples of his hardening temper abounded in these days, of which the following may serve as choice examples.

Of an actor or actress:

"... knows not the A.B.C. of his art."

"... scrupulously artificial and ever glacial."

"... played it [Rosalind] for one painfully memorable week and looked rather like a plush photograph album."

"... a palpably imitation rough diamond." (This one earned him a clout on the jaw from the infuriated actor.)

"... her exhausting and unbeguiling performance."

"... most comic case of miscasting in the records of the season."

"... should have been gently but firmly shot at sunrise."

Of a play:

"The suffering of the audience was beyond words."

"... a rampageous piece of vulgarity."

"... cheapest fifth-rate plot of the season."

"... a vulgar bore."

"Nearly all members of the cast scream, yell, and howl quite unbelievably."

"... left a taste of lukewarm parsnip juice."

By this time he was the most courted and best-hated critic in the business. Not his pen alone, but his voice as well, contributed to his unpopularity. He developed a trick of recasting a current play nearer to the heart's desire, by preference in some gathering whence word-of-mouth opinion would inevitably be reported out. Imagine the fury of Julia Marlowe upon being told by some dear friend how much superior, according to Alexander Woollcott, Mrs. Fiske would have been, for both looks and interpretation, in the role; or the sanguinary reaction of George M. Cohan to the unwelcome news, "Didja hear what that fat *Times* s.o.b. told Belasco about you last night? He said that Frank Craven woulda made a monkey outa you if he'd had the part."

Somewhere in this phase of his career, the critic was rash enough to offer himself as target for the enemy. Unable to refuse any request from the prime object of his heroine-worship, Minnie Maddern Fiske, he accepted an invitation to act in her all-star benefit for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. His part was Henry VIII, playing opposite Madge Kennedy as Anne Boleyn. The audience was largely theatrical. It was primed for him. His first appearance stopped the show. For five minutes the house hissed and booed joyously. Exiting, the amateur actor was heard to murmur wonderingly: "I can't understand why Madge should be so unpopular."

It was said of Erasmus<sup>1</sup> that when the monks read his *Encomium Moriae*, they felt that there was no appropriate comment but to murder the author. The Rialto held the same sentiments for Woollcott. Thomas R. Ybarra told him that if he were found with his throat cut, one hundred and fifty people would be rounded up by the police on suspicion of the murder, a wisecrack promptly appropriated as Broadway's own. A member of The Players moved to amend "murder" to "justifiable homicide."

Hamilton College having later conferred a degree upon Woollcott, '09, the following colloquy was reported from the Lambs Club, where actors most foregather:

FIRST ACTOR: I see Hamilton has given Woollcott an L.H.D.

SECOND ACTOR: What does that stand for?

FIRST ACTOR (*approximating*): Doctor of Humane Letters.

SECOND ACTOR (*outraged*): When did that louse ever write anybody a humane letter?

## IO

### THE SEIDLITZ POWDER IN TIMES SQUARE

It was, as Bernard de Voto wrote to Woollcott in a charming letter, "the enchanted April of 1920, when the literary ex-infantryman read the *Smart Set*, when the Renaissance had not narrowed down to Amy Lowell, and when there were mighty stirrings everywhere in these

<sup>1</sup> Preserved Smith, *Erasmus*.

Western reaches." Zealots were walking barefoot in Central Park grass at sunrise, to the derision of the squirrels, and in every suburb devotees of Coué were lifting themselves by their spiritual bootstraps as they chanted "Every day in every way I am getting better and better" between post-breakfast burps and anxious glances at the clock with a view to the 8.15. Emily Post was expounding to the Bronx, in the idiom of Park Avenue, the strategy of the oyster fork.

Journalism was further and further impinging upon the realm of literature. Don Marquis, Christopher Morley, and F.P.A. were imbuing their daily copy with a strongly bookish flavour. They were treating books as general-interest news, much as Woollcott had been treating dramatics.

Hitherto Woollcott's companionships and interests had been almost exclusively theatrical-journalistic. The orbits of his duties and his amusements approximately coincided. He was content that it should be so. On his modest salary and with his long working hours, he has little temptation to social expansion. Now, through Frank Adams, he began to meet important figures of the literary world. Three of them, Alice Duer Miller, Dorothy Parker, and Edna Ferber, became close friends, and two of those friendships were lifelong. His horizons were enlarged.

It could hardly be said that his own slender contributions to the library shelves had as yet given him any standing either with the public or the craft. Nevertheless, his reputation began now to spread beyond the confines of Newspaper Row and the Rialto, to which it had been limited. At what point it brightened into celebrity is hardly to be determined.

Some contemporaries ascribe his emergence to an article in the February 1921 *Smart Set*, couched in George Jean Nathan's classically rancorous style. With malice prepense, Nathan refrained from gratifying his victim by naming him. As obscuration, if, indeed, it were so intended, it signally failed. The stupidest Broadway rounder had no difficulty in identifying the article's "effervescent young neo-Acton Davies from a small up-state college," described in the caption as "The Seidlitz Powder in Times Square." Nathan continued: "His appraisals of his feminine favourites read like a bewitched college boy writing and beseeching a lock of hair." His style is "either a gravy bomb, a bursting gladiolus, a palpitating *missa cantata*, an attack of psychic hydrophobia, or a Roman denunciation" and is ascribable, the critic surmises, to "a

too high blood pressure perhaps, an unfortunate chronic costiveness: something of the sort." The subject's habit of "for ever crawling on his knees to see something or somebody," his "lump-in-the-throat type of reviewing," is further deprecated.

There was plenty of justification for the Nathan diatribe. The Woollcott treatment, as embodied both in his first-night reviews and his better-matured Sunday column, whether in approval or dispraise, was of the super-high-pressure kind. Superlatives, favourable and denunciatory, abounded. He was bursting at the seams with generous admirations, breathless encomiums, petty prejudices, and violent dislikes. This does not make for good reporting or judicial estimate. It does produce hearty writing. *The Times'* swelling readership, for which Woollcott was certainly responsible in part, ate it up. F.P.A., a kindlier commentator than Nathan and equally perspicacious, took an opposite view:

Lord! This man hath the power to make whatever he writes of seem so interesting that . . . when he writes of a play it seemeth to me that not to have seen it is a dereliction of duty.

The Shuberts had given *The Times* man his first boost into the limelight by their valuable enmity. Nathan's verbal assault was less helpful only because more ephemeral. To the Rialto intelligentsia, if that be not too hardy a contradiction in terms, *Smart Set* was as Holy Writ. Woollcott's name was on every actor's tongue. "What an outrage!" or "Did you see what Nathan did to that louse?" according to the point of view. The maligned one was delighted. He carried the clipping in his breast pocket, agog to produce it at the first opportunity.

The immediate commercial reaction took the form of an offer from a flourishing night club: one thousand dollars to Mr. Woollcott for a week's appearance as master of ceremonies. Mr. Woollcott was affronted.

"I'd rather die!" he proclaimed.

Hollywood also beckoned. Hector Turnbull, formerly of the *Evening Sun*, was back from that Golconda with tales of easy money. To borrow a Hollywood idiom, he "contacted" Aleck.

"Why don't you come out?"

Aleck was unreceptive.

"How much is *The Times* paying you?" persisted the other.

"One hundred dollars a week."

"Chicken-feed! Anyone can get five hundred out there. You could get a thousand. More, if you stick out for it."

In coldly measured accents, Aleck replied: "When I take up street-walking, the street will be Broadway, not Hollywood Boulevard."

Huddled in some noisome French ditch, Sergeant Woolcott had more than once been heard to lament that if he ever got back to America in one piece, he would make a quick jump to the Hamilton College campus, stretch his weary bones in the shadow of the chapel spire, and lie there until the trustees shifted him. His opportunity came in the summer of 1921. Theatrical production was in its seasonal slump. He had picked up some extra cash in the magazine field. Taking with him the unfinished manuscript of his third book, *Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play*, and an expensive croquet set, the alumnus of '09 went to Clinton and settled into his old quarters in Carnegie Hall. Across the level John Calder, his wife, Polly, and their infant daughter were house-keeping for the vacation in the commodious Alpha Delta Phi Hall. Though not contemporaries—Jack Calder was '15—the two men had met in the war and become friendly. The Calders undertook to feed the bachelor. Aleck put up his croquet set on the cropped lawn outside Carnegie, equipping wickets and stakes with candles. His life fell into a calm and pleasant pattern; breakfast at 10 a.m. with Polly Calder, her husband having gone to his job in Utica; work all day at his writing; dinner at 7; croquet until 11; bridge or talk until 1 or 2 or 3 a.m. It was a happy and restful interlude.

There was another purpose to his visit. His fraternity, Theta Delta Chi, housed in unattractive quarters halfway down the hill, was seeking a site near the campus for a new lodge. To the east of the college buildings the land had been acquired by Dr. M. Woolsey Stryker, who was president when Aleck was an undergraduate, but had resigned shortly before the war and was succeeded by Dr. Frederick C. Ferry, who was, like Aleck, a Theta Delt. It was common gossip, quite possibly baseless, that Dr. Stryker had refused to negotiate with the college for any of his holdings. Dr. Ferry suggested that Aleck drive over to Rome, buy the entire field, turn over at cost to the fraternity what it needed, and dispose of the remainder to the college at the same rate, a non-profit operation throughout. The younger man, who was a warm admirer of "Prexy" Stryker, fell in with the plan, spent a companionable day with the ex-president, and returned to the hill with his mission accomplished.

Another real-estate operation was on his mind. That queer heritage

of the communal Phalanx, the itch to keep an inn, now took definite form. There was no college hostelry of any sort. At the bend of the hill stood the North mansion, hallowed to all Hamilton men as the residence of the famous "Old Greek," Edward North. Aleck thought that this location could be bought at bargain price and made over for guests. He would undertake the financial management, would live there summers, and eventually, when he retired from journalism, make it his permanent residence. Twenty thousand dollars was his estimate of the initial expense. To a selected list of alumni he wrote, asking subscriptions of one thousand dollars apiece. Many of us were interested, but the project hung fire, there was some doubt as to the availability of the property, and when the attention of the moving spirit was diverted to an island in a Vermont lake, the whole thing fell through. It was, in the opinion of at least one alumnus, a loss to the college.

Above the campus lived Professor A. P. Saunders, head of the Department of Chemistry, with his family. Young William Duncan Saunders was much about the college and there met the vacationing alumnus. Duncan was a rare and precocious spirit, manly, gay, of high intelligence and imagination, already a budding poet who had attained the minor print of local newspapers, perhaps potentially worthy of the overworked phrase, "another Chatterton."

Though only fourteen, he was preparing to enter college the next June. Between him and Woolcott there ripened one of those odd and strong affections which sometimes bind different types and different ages. On the elder's side there was an element in it of the thwarted paternal, as if this were the son that he might have had but for "that beastly complication" of his young manhood. In one of his letters he writes:

Then along came this amazing boy, this extraordinary mixture of horse sense and a divine elation. He was full of salty, granular humour, and yet there was a song in him somewhere and a little stardust still on his shoulders . . . a little of the clouds of glory, I suppose. A little glamour.

To young Duncan the figure of the critic loomed large. He was more than a friend; he was a wise and stimulating mentor. There was talk of their collaborating on a play which the boy had in mind. The association was maintained after the newspaperman returned to his job and the youth entered college. It was cut short midway of Duncan

Saunders's freshman year by a minor accident of play such as occurs twenty times a day without serious result among college boys. The news of the death was a shattering blow to Woolcott. To his classmate and close friend, Professor Robert B. Rudd, he poured out his grief in one of his finest and most revealing letters:

Dear Bob,

This is to thank you for writing me and, if I ever finish it, it will be an effort to relieve my mind a little of the burden that is on it. I went to Grace Root immediately to try to talk to her, but that was a complete failure for the reason that my throat immediately went out of business and I could only stare dumbly and miserably around and go away again.

I stayed away from Clinton Tuesday<sup>1</sup> in a kind of panic. I had my trunks all ready and my work farmed out, but at the last minute my nerve wilted. My only reason for wanting to go was the haunting notion that Duncan would have wished me to be there. Well, if he now knows I wasn't he also knows that, from my hiding-place in New York, I could hear every accent and see every line of that march across the campus through the snow and that his very desolate friend was pacing the floor, swearing like a bargee in a grotesque effort to ease an intolerable pain.

I don't have to tell you or anyone who knew him that I feel incalculably bereft. But you cannot know, you cannot begin to know how real my impoverishment is. No one will ever understand how fond of him I was. You must have suspected more than once that I'm a pretty trivial, rootless person, a fellow of motley and diffused affections, permanently adrift. Well, that's true. And this too is true. It just so happens that never in all my grown-up days before last summer had I known what it was to have a child's friendship and companionship. That was largely due to chance—due for instance to the fact that not once in twenty years have I spent so much as a week under the same roof with a youngster. It was partly due also, I am afraid, to some inadequacy in me, some incapacity to hold their interest or to give them my own, some blind spot in me somewhere. Well, anyway, whatever of tenderness we all of us have stored up in us for some little chap, the love that in normal lives goes, I suppose, to a man's own son, had never been tapped in me. . . . Not all at once, but imperceptibly, as the summer went on, he took over as his own that untenanted part of me—moved in, bag and baggage, into what is after all, Bob, a rather lonely heart, though it isn't done for comedians to say things like that about ourselves. You, who have spent much time with children (who have indeed a couple of your own), must be familiar enough with the sense of the eternal miracle of the world's renewal which they give you. Well, I walked beside Duncan with a sort of dawning amazement. I suppose he began in me the notion

<sup>1</sup> The day of the funeral.

that the new generation was a little better than anything that had gone before and that the world was looking up a bit. Just now I'm not so sure.

He liked me. I'm darned if I am going to be diffident about that. I was and am too proud of it. He enjoyed being with me. His quizzical, gay laugh was such a rich reward that I was for ever reaching for my cap and bells. He even looked up to me. Not that he couldn't see through me. He had a disconcerting clairvoyance and he could puncture me with skill and acumen when a sly word was all that was needed. I imagine all people face children as a sort of test, that it is a common feeling to experience a sense of coming up for judgment before them. Anyway, they do put the fear of God into me. I think that all last summer when I was making headway in his affection and confidence, I was feeling wordlessly but strongly that there must be some good in the old mountebank if he could see it—or perhaps even that there was as much good there as he could see. Once or twice I have heard someone speak of my kindness to Duncan. I have never seen a cart so far before a horse. What I want to bear witness to, what I have been trying to in all this, is his great kindness, his great goodness to me. I look about me on my various battered possessions. The richest of them all, the one I prize most of all, is the memory of his fondness for me.

You say he was fey. Did you think so? I never did. Not for a moment. I thought of him always as someone destined to do a big job in the world. I rather expected that I, in my slippered pantaloon days, would sit in the hearth-corner and boast toothlessly of having known him when he was a kid. I had even luxuriated a little in the vague, undefined notion that sometime by some financial miracle, I would be able to take him to Europe on one of my pilgrimages and play Virgil at his side on a search through France. Just how this was going to be managed by me or allowed by his folks remained a bit misty. But, my God, Bob, what a person to show France to! Dear Jo, wot larx!

Well—that's that. I am jogging along . . . the while all this is churning away inside of me. The trouble with me is that there is nothing in my own background, my own training or my own patchwork philosophy that is of any use to me. When—but there, I give it up.

How and in what words can I write to his father and mother—what words that won't seem clumsy and strident and intrusive? I had meant to clear my head by rattling away to you and then sit down to a letter to them. I am wondering, now, if this letter won't serve better. You would know. As you have read it, would it ease or deepen their pain to hear my testimony, do you think? Perhaps they would both get a certain satisfaction out of knowing how genuinely and how deeply a chance passerby, a rather lonesome passerby, admired and loved their little boy.

Now I'm done. I have tried to tell it but there are too many things that lie outside words. Some day, when I think I can go through with it, I shall strike



out for the Hill. I don't know when that will be. When Grace and Edward suggested on Thursday that I plan to go up with them in a fortnight or so, I said, Never again. But that won't do, will it? Some day again, Bob.

To protect the living from the onus of having caused, however innocently, the death of a friend, a pact of secrecy was entered into. Four persons, so I was authoritatively told at the time, knew the circumstances of Duncan Saunders's death. The knowledge was successfully limited to that little group. Nowhere else, I believe, but upon a college campus could such inviolability have been maintained. That peculiar and ironbound code of honour which is in the fabric of the highest academic tradition has kept the secret.

What relief from pain was possible Aleck found in collecting, with his friend Grace C. (Mrs. Edward W.) Root, such letters, fragments, and manuscripts, both verse and prose, as could be found, and publishing them in a slender volume, *Fifteen Years Old*. There are passages in it which suggest that the Woollcott appraisal of the youth's future was by no means extravagant.

Towards the end of his own life, when the inroads of death had taken from him many of his most cherished friends, he retained a special place in memory for "this amazing boy." In the summer of 1942 he wrote to Duncan's mother:

You may remember that I had something on my mind to talk to you about when you were in Syracuse. (He was then in hospital.) But all during that troubled time I was too near the edge of tears to say a word about anything close to my heart. Of course it was about Duncan. I just wanted you to know that I never forget him. After twenty years he is as living in my mind and the tidings of his death as shattering as on the day when the news first reached me.

After that busy and productive summer of 1921, Aleck went back to his routine with the completed manuscript of his collected Sunday contributions, *Shouts and Murmurs*, as well as *Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play*, ready for book publication, and with a vague discontent stirring within him. There were times when the dramatic writing from which he had derived so lively a satisfaction seemed inadequate: "preposterously inappropriate," these "comic little pieces for the paper."

What else was there for him? His early ambitions had withered. He confided to Hawley Truax, with whom he was living on West Fifty-seventh Street, mothered by Mrs. Truax, who was devoted to him, that he had reluctantly abandoned hope of creative writing. It was not

his métier; he had nothing of his own to contribute. He had made an inventory of his capacities and figured it out to this conclusion:

A. His critical opinions carried weight and were readily marketable.

B. He could retell acceptably the stories of others.

C. It followed that if he was to enlarge his scope, it must be as gossip, wit, raconteur: not as novelist or playwright as he had once hoped.

True, the magazine field was opening hospitably to him, but whatever he might attempt there must be along the lines of his limited and inventoried endeavour.

Early in the winter of 1922 a portent swept across the theatrical firmament. *Abie's Irish Rose* was to break all precedents, make a record run, and, incidentally, show up the cult of dramatic criticism. For with a few exceptions, the reviewers fell upon it with demoniac glee. Mr. Pepys (F.P.A.) thought it "the poorest, tawdriest play I can remember seeing." The *Herald* found in it "sweepings of numberless variety acts based on antipathy," while shrewdly prophesying a long run. "Cheap claptrap," said the *Evening Post*. The *World* ignored it. The *Brooklyn Eagle* termed it "ridiculous, idiotic, stupid." The Hearst papers gave it lukewarm approval. And where was Critic Woollcott in this chorus of stentorian disparagement, with its two weak pipings of commendation? He was with the minority, only more so.

The blatant comities of the play, which put the Jewish monkey into the Irish parrot's cage, and then filled the surrounding air not with fur and feathers but with lush sentiments and close, inter-racial harmonies, appealed to all that was most romantic in the Woollcott soul. To be quite frank, he gushed.

For the next few days he was a hooting and a derision to his fellows. For the next few years, the shoe was on the other foot. Robert Benchley, who sat in the scorner's seat, spread the record in *Life's* "Confidential Guide to the Theatre." His first pronouncement was "Something awful. . . . One of the season's worst," and he assumed an early and merciful demise for the show. After it had run a year, he confessed, "We give up." In 1924 he gathered his courage in both hands and prophesied, "In another two or three years we'll have this play driven out of town." Despair supervened; in 1925 he foresaw that the only way to end the run would be to tear down the theatre; and in 1926 he offered this note: "Closing soon (only fooling)."

It is not on record that Critic Woollcott was unduly exalted by the public's confirmation of his judgment. In fact, he later admitted that his emotional approval of the comedy's noble sentiments had overridden his more coolly critical faculties.

After a period at any job, Woollcott found himself "incurably disposed to quit it and try another." His service with *The Times* was drawing to a close after thirteen years. Not that he felt any disaffection. Carr Van Anda was still, in his mind, and always remained the greatest of contemporary newspapermen. Towards no other publication with which he was connected did he ever own such loyalty as he gave to his first journalistic Alma Mater. But it was time for him to make a move, to improve his circumstances. Opportunity was at hand. He went sorrowfully to Van Anda.

The managing editor gave him his blessing and told him he was doing the right thing. He would not always be in the newspaper business. *The Times* could not afford, under its policy, to pay him what he could earn elsewhere. He would make more money; let him save it up against the time when he should launch upon broader seas. Looking back at the fledgling reporter, the developing critic and the national figure that he became, Van Anda, twenty-one years after his protégé bade him an unsteady farewell, wrote thus of him:

In spite of the brusqueness and other peculiarities of conduct developed with his rise in the world which amused or annoyed his friends, according to mood, he was by nature really a sensitive, sometimes almost a shrinking soul. What began as a defence mechanism led to the invention of the almost wholly artificial character, Alexander Woollcott, persistently enacted before the world until it became a profitable investment. . . . It is a matter of extreme regret to me, as an old friend, that his sacrifice of brilliant gifts and varied acquirements to the dramatization of himself as a personality has left him with a far less secure literary fame than he might well have achieved.

Coincidentally with his prospectively enhanced fortunes, Aleck moved. Hawley Truax had discovered two old houses for sale far over on West Forty-seventh Street and, in partnership with Harold Ross and his wife, Jane Grant, had bought them, and set about throwing them together and modernizing the result. Aleck invited himself into the partnership, which was conducted on co-operative principles. His portion he characterized as "a small and disordered flat in the Gas House district." The mistress of the establishment writes of it in retrospect:

It was a mad, amusing ménage, made up of Aleck, Hawley Truax, Ross and myself as owners and at first there were two others, Kate Oglebay and William Powell, as tenants and participants on the top floor. It soon became the hangout for all the literary and musical crowd and I well remember that on one Sunday evening I had twenty-eight unexpected guests for supper. I say "I," because I ran the house and faced the kitchen problems. I also received a summons for buying too much liquor, and only a lot of pull kept me from being called before the grand jury. Another detail that comes to my mind was the matter of diets for the group. Aleck liked only hearty fare; Ross and Hawley both had bad stomachs, so when there was light soup especially prescribed for the latter, Aleck would refuse firmly to come to the table until the "digusting stuff" was cleared away. If there was no pudding for dessert he would flounce upstairs to his apartment. We all had separate apartments, sharing only the dining-room and kitchen.

Aleck's interpretation of the communal privileges was so liberal that it brought about the eventual disruption of the household. That habit of nocturnal conversation which George Gouge had remarked was growing upon him. He would return to the home at any hour of the night, invade the Ross apartment, and embark upon a monologue which, in spite of its undeniably entertaining quality, was too often ill-timed. Loss of sleep preyed upon the couple, but protests were unavailing. Equally objectionable was the Woollcott persistency in crashing any non-communal party they might be giving. Not only this, but he would attempt, with variable success, to raid the gathering of any guests whom he might fancy and carry them off to his own apartment.

Life in the Gash House, as Aleck called it, was a fitful guerrilla warfare between truces until the combination dissolved and dispersed.

## II

### TWO THOUSAND A MONTH

IN the summer of 1922, Woollcott found himself like a babe on a church step, "exposed to that cold, damp wind called Frank A. Munsey."

Munsey had made a fortune in cheap, chain-store groceries, increased

it through a group of cheap, chain-store magazines, and moved in on the profession of journalism through the purchase of the *Press*, a third-rate morning newspaper. Next he acquired the influential *Sun*, traditionally "the newspaper man's newspaper," which inspired Bert Leston Taylor to lament in his column that "all good newspapers, when they die, go to Frank Munsey." Third to come under his control was the *New York Herald*, a tottering property still enjoying remnants of public esteem and respectability in spite of the character of its former owner, James Gordon Bennett II, which was by no means estimable nor even respectable.

Never was intruder less welcome than Munsey in Newspaper Row. He possessed none of the qualities and professed none of the principles which good newspapermen respect; in addition to which he had a singularly unpleasing personality. On the occasion of his death in 1925, the American press, with a few honourable exceptions, gushed politely over the remains, while privately giving assent to the usually benignant William Allen White, who unburdened his soul on the editorial page of his *Emporia Gazette* to this effect:

#### REST IN TRUST

Frank Munsey, the great publisher, is dead,

Frank Munsey contributed to the journalism of his day the talent of a meat packer, the morals of a money changer, and the manners of an undertaker. He and his kind have about succeeded in transforming a once-noble profession into an eight per cent security.

May he rest in trust!

Whatever his professional shortcomings, Frank Munsey had the acumen and the ready cash to buy first-class brains. His personal representative and general factotum in 1922 was Charles M. Lincoln, an outstanding figure in daily journalism. It is Lincoln's conviction that his chief seldom took the trouble to read the newspapers for himself, but got his opinions on his adopted profession from others. Someone must have told him about the Woollcott Sunday page.<sup>1</sup> He summoned Lincoln.

"Do you know a man named Woollcott?"

"Alexander Woollcott? Everybody knows him."

"I've been reading that column of his. What does he call it now?"

<sup>1</sup> Lincoln never knew it (or, if he did, never told it) but it was Anna Case of the Metropolitan Opera Company, later the wife of Clarence Mackay, who talked Munsey into hiring the critic.

"'Second Thoughts on First Nights'," suggested Lincoln.

"That's it," said Munsey. "'Second Thoughts on First Nights.' Pretty good, is it?"

"Very good."

"Do you think this man Woolcott would be useful to the *Herald*?"

"Yes."

"Get him."

Pursuant to this characteristic ukase, Lincoln called up the critic and made an appointment for luncheon. There was only a slight acquaintanceship between the two men. Lincoln admired Woolcott both as a critic and as a circulation-getting "feature." Woolcott respected Lincoln's experience, judgment, and reputation for journalistic integrity. Between the two minds there was no necessity for circumlocution. Lincoln opened proceedings with the question:

"Are you under contract to *The Times*?"

"No," said Woolcott.

"Would you consider coming to the *Herald*?"

"I don't want to be a newspaperman all my life. I want to do other writing."

"That might be arranged. How much time do you want for it?"

"Four months out of the year."

As nearly a third of every theatrical year is sterile of important productions, this was not exorbitant.

"What salary do you want?" asked the emissary.

"Two thousand," replied the critic.

For a moment Lincoln was taken aback. Two thousand for eight months' work figured out to \$250 a month. Surely *The Times* was paying its first-string critic more than that!

"Two thousand in all?" he asked doubtfully.

"Two thousand a month," answered Woolcott without a flicker.

No critic in America commanded such a salary. Lincoln smiled. He thought that he detected a slight responsive quiver at the corners of the other's mouth.

"Is that the word that you want me to take back to Mr. Munsey?" he inquired.

"I wish you would," said Woolcott politely.

The rest of the conversation was general discussion of theatricals and the newspaper business.

Woolcott returned to his desk, not wholly happy. The jump from

one hundred dollars a week to two thousand a month (if he got it, which he did not really expect) would have been beyond the wildest dreams of a few years before. But the thought of leaving *The Times*, his second Alma Mater, was a wrench, if not actually an apostasy. Working for Frank A. Munsey would be, he suspected, very different from working for Adolph Ochs and Carr Van Anda. Where he was, he could be sure of complete independence; there had never been any editorial interference with his free expression of opinion, unless Van Anda's censorship of his attempted improprieties could be so regarded. Could he expect as high a standard of journalistic ethics from "the Park Row Grocerman"?

There was plenty of basis for doubt. The experiences of Hamilton Owens, dramatic critic of the *Press*, were of common report along Broadway. As Owens was a friend of Woollcott's it may be assumed that he knew of them. It was Mr. Munsey's amiable habit to call his dramatic critic on the telephone as the paper was about going to press, with some such message as this:

"We are reviewing *Winsonie Winnie* in to-morrow's paper, I believe, Mr. Owens. I am now having supper with the ingénue. I hope you are giving the play a good review."

Whereupon the hapless and infuriated Owens must call back his copy from the composing room, tear it to pieces, and sweeten it with honeyed words for the partner of his principal's midnight meal. This was the newspaper business at its pettiest and most personal.

Woollcott informed some of his fellows on *The Times* that if Munsey sprang any of his sacred cows on *him*, he'd sour their milk for 'em and tell the old man to take his job and stick it up his ink-stained sleeve. There was an impression that he secretly hoped for the collapse of the negotiations. If so, he was promptly disillusioned. To Lincoln's report on the \$2,000 demand, Munsey said simply: "All right."

Thus, in the fall of 1922, the reviewer went to work for the journalistic cold, damp wind.

Whether the new employee received some assurance of non-interference, Lincoln, after this lapse of time, is unable to state with certainty, but he thinks that there was something of the kind. He does recall giving a strong hint to his chief that Woollcott was a prickly customer who was used to a free hand and might not take kindly to suggestions. No complaint of being hampered was heard from the

critic. One comment on his boss is preserved, though he did not commit it to print:

"In Frank Munsey's mind, loyalty is a one-way street."

Ten years from the time when he blithely wrote his mother that he could never expect more than a bare living from the practice of journalism, Alexander Woollcott was on the way to riches. Reckoning his magazine earnings with his salary, he could hardly have fallen below twenty thousand dollars' income in the ensuing year.

Three occasions in his life, so he once told the present writer, were met with a sinking heart and wet eyes: his departure from College Hill, his farewell to his buddies of *Stars and Stripes*, and his last pay envelope from *The Times*. He started on the *Herald* in October 1922.

The pace had become fast. In another era, Woollcott, now approaching the height of his powers, might have attained to undisputed leadership. But this was an age of giants in dramatic criticism. For sheer virtuosity of writing there is no other period to set beside it. So superior was the craft to the institution of which it treated that a visiting critic noted in his own British idiom that the American theatre had "a better press than it deserves."

In the daily field there were Percy Hammond, Heywood Broun, Burns Mantle, Alan Dale, J. Ranken Towse, Kenneth Macgowan, Gilbert Gabriel, Bide Dudley and Charles Darnton; in the magazine department, George Jean Nathan, Dorothy Parker, and Robert Benchley. Two of these, both newcomers, jumped at once to the forefront: Hammond and Broun. Both, to diverge for the moment to the physical, were, like Woollcott, gross of waistline. The profession dubbed them "The Three Fat Fates of Broadway."

Percy Hammond was lured from the *Chicago Tribune*, after twenty-five years of service, by an offer from the *New York Tribune* which put him in the Woollcott class financially. Uneducated in the formal sense—high school was the extent of his training—he drew direct from "the well of purest English undefiled," and wrote with an aptness of allusion, a richness of literary resource, and a clarity of style that the most erudite of academicians might have envied. He said of his own writing that "it has classical roots and is addressed to the contemporary news-page reader."

His was an unsparing pen, yet for some reason he never roused the murderous yearnings of which Woollcott was the object, possibly because, like Burns Mantle, he was chary of cultivating stage friend-



ships and thus laying himself open to the charge of favouritism. True, he was barred here and there by the exclusive Shuberts, but few actors thirsted overtly for his blood. In that word-of-mouth exchange which is at once the most ephemeral and the most sincere form of tribute to a writer, he was more quoted than any of his competitors. His anatomical admonition to the Shuberts apropos of the human knee has already been cited. Treating of a somewhat noisome French farce, he noted: "Of the acting of Miss Bergère's company one may not speak candidly unless one is in a trench."

A much-touted musical show he punctured as being "a pretentious sketch which has words but no language, sounds but no music, and movement but no action." Of a would-be heroic baritone, he wrote that "he sings a battle song in the manner of a germ going to war," and he vented his distaste for a precious pair who specialized in the supposedly humorous appeal of homosexuality by suggesting that "their dialogue be subjected to a treatment of chloride of lime. Savoy and Brennan? Sodom and Gomorrah!"

When later it devolved upon him to deal professionally with Alexander Woollcott, he most palpably pulled his punches. This is matter for regret—or perhaps it is not, according to the point of view. I venture the opinion that Aleck, himself, was disappointed.

Heywood Broun was similar only in his rotundity. A huge, shambling bear of a creature, with grease spots down his front and with an air of infantile trust in and enjoyment of the world, he had the soul of a crusader and the self-denying courage of a martyr. For sheer brain power he outranked, in my opinion, all his fellow columnists. At Harvard he had divided his undergraduate attention between English literature and sports. When he came out, he took a job as sports reporter. Just what there is so stimulating to the higher brain centres in chronicling baseball, prize fights, and horse races opens a field of speculation too broad for these pages. In passing, such notables as Ring Lardner, John Kieran, Damon Runyon, Olin Downes, Sigmund Spaeth, Paul Gallico, Harold L. Ickes, Westbrook Pegler, Ernest Hemingway, and Charles Van Loan may be cited as alumni of the sporting pages. Broun's brilliantly written athletics indicated his capacity for other types of writing, and, on his way to become the most stimulating columnist of his day, he took up dramatic criticism, first for the *Tribune*, then for *The World*.

The spectacle of Broun and Woollcott, seated back to back in an

uptown hotel room which they shared as an after-theatre office, hammering out their hasty and polished copy for the first edition, was little short of awesome. An unknown wag hung above the door a sign, reading:

## MINDS AT WORK

Between the two men existed a solid affection. Woolcott had a profound respect for his friend's technical skill and intellectual integrity, and an admiring awe for his courage and crusading fervour.

When the columnist took the critic to task for some failure to measure up to a pretty exacting standard, Woolcott accepted the chastening with grief and meekness, though he did permit himself one outburst of ungovernable resentment over Broun's tart review of *The Woolcott Reader*. In a postscript to a friend, the author-compiler of the *Reader* thus freed his mind about the reviewer:

"It seemed to me childish, spiteful, and (even to one who had known for some years that he was a phony) surprisingly unscrupulous."

There spoke the wounded *amour-propre* of the thin-skinned artist. Woolcott did not really consider Broun a phony. Far from it. The two fellow journalists whose judgments, adverse or favourable, he instinctively respected were Broun and F.P.A.

Towards Percy Hammond his attitude was peculiar. Too sound a craftsman and too shrewd a judge not to recognize Hammond's superiority as a writer, Woolcott never quite liked him, though they were not unfriendly. Hammond, for his part, delighted in the Woolcott wit and turn of phrase, while he deprecated the other's spirit of furore and once expressed the private wish that Woolcott would not "always be writing at the top of his lungs."

To Woolcott, the older critic was an eternal puzzle.

"Where does he *get it*?" he once demanded of me petulantly, referring to the Hammond style. "Here I've paid for the best classical education to be had, and this fellow can write the rings of Saturn around me."

I suggested from my own observation that Percy sweated out his work, word by word, line by line, almost literally through blood and tears.

"If I tried that," returned Aleck (who certainly lacked neither conscience nor care in his writings, even in those hurried days), "I'd read like a soapbox pedant."

Aleck's second-string man was Frank Vreeland. It was Vreeland's job to come early and open the departmental mail. A snapshot photograph fell from a foreign envelope one day. Reflecting that his chief's fan mail was coming from far afield, the assistant observed with approval the two attractive young faces therein pictured, and read enough of the accompanying letter to determine that it had no professional bearing. Had he read further he might have ascertained that the girls were Marie-Louise Patriarche of Pommard, whom the *Stars and Stripes*' staff had adopted as their war-orphan mascot, and her small Tante Henriette. From the close of the war the round-faced, big-eyed correspondent, known to the child as M'sieu L'Hibou (Mister Owl), had been passing the hat, harrying his fellow pressmen, and contributing lavishly, himself, to the girl's education. This may have been in part the reason for the loan from Al Getman as his first post-war financing operation.

Discretion being a required attribute in dealing with the touchy Woolcott, Vreeland refrained from mentioning the photographs. He had early discerned Aleck's lively distaste for being suspected of secret-ing the milk of human kindness.

"He just did such things in a matter-of-fact manner," says Vreeland, "as if he considered it no more than the normal, civilized thing to do . . . never with any of the sentimental show that one might expect of such an arrant sentimentalist."

His underhanded beneficences were extended to his associates. At the time of his joining the *Herald*, its proprietor was jealously excluding his writers from the privilege of the by-line. Not even Frank Ward O'Malley or Edwin C. Hill was allowed a signature. Aleck quietly had Vreeland's name appended to the second-string reviews and saw that it stuck. He schemed for extension of the meagre Munsey vacations allowed to members of his department. Says Vreeland, "He never did this with a beaming, godfatherly pat on the back, like a Sunday-school superintendent rewarding a good scholar. He just announced briefly that he had seen to it. He took a pride in seeing the men who worked with him get ahead."

Thus he created an *esprit de corps* hitherto alien to that office.

"Everyone who's ever assisted me always seems to go places," he beamingly bragged to an editor. "Look at George Kaufman! And, the other day, Brock Pemberton nearly knocked me down in the street with his limousine."

Unlike most dramatic critics of the day, he took a personal and technical interest in the make-up of the theatre page, hired excellent artists for the cuts, and persuaded notable writers to contribute articles and comment. Frank Vreeland's may not be a wholly unbiased view, but he is an old hand and his opinion is entitled to respect when he says of Woolcott: "He really made the dramatic department of the *Herald* stand out as, I believe, that of no other paper has done before or since."

As *The Times* had pre-empted his titular "Second Thoughts on First Nights," he called his Sunday *Herald* department "In the Wake of the Plays," which inspired a producer to snarl that Woolcott could always be depended on to furnish the corpse for the wake. If he found the new environment less congenial than the old, he did not let it affect his work. He gave faithful service to Munsey and, though he had no professional respect for his boss, he was surprised upon further acquaintance to find himself unaffected by any active dislike. The Glorified Groceryman was not as black as Park Row had painted him.

## 12

### THE SOPHISTICATES

IN his days as a general reporter Alexander Woolcott was assigned to write a "Sunday special" on an obscure West Forty-fourth Street hostelry, the Algonquin. He found it "a little unpretentious hotel, tucked away on a side street" and occasionally patronized by such diverse notables as Rollo Ogden, William T. Tilden II, Evangeline Booth, and Raymond Hitchcock. Douglas Fairbanks visited it in the way of trade, before his acting days, to sell soap to the management, and returned later to buy luncheon for Mary Pickford.

What might be termed the official record ascribes its genesis as an intellectual oasis in the arid Philistinism of Broadway to a telephone call, Woolcott to Adams to Broun, for a luncheon. Where? There was a place next door, said Woolcott, then staying at the City Club, where they had a good apple pie. The trio formed a weekly luncheon habit, F.P.A. coming up from his downtown office every Saturday. To

them presently gathered Ross and Winterich, ex-*Stars and Stripes*, Robert Benchley, and the Pemberton brothers, Brock and Murdock. Frank Case, proprietor of the *Algonquin* and later an author in his own right, moved them from their quiet corner to more spacious accommodations.

Such is the classic legend of the Round Table's origin. Murdock Pemberton, one of the formative group, has another and more picturesque version, according to which the foundation of the institution was a "gag," a practical joke. Through Pemberton, Aleck and John Peter Toohey were brought together one noon for luncheon at the *Algonquin*, Toohey having a press-agent item which he thought that *The Times* might use. Fortuitously William Murray, music critic of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and Arthur Samuels of the *New Yorker* staff, joined the trio. Aleck took charge of and monopolized the conversation. Afterwards Murray and Pemberton exchanged uncomplimentary views upon his conversational extravagances and set about reprisals.

At the time it was much the fashion to be bored and cynical about the recent war, and equally smart to disdain the expanding American Legion. The two conspirators decided to form an Alexander Woollcott Chapter, S. Jay Kaufman Post of the Legion. The point of this was Woollcott's irritated dislike of the columnist, Kaufman, "perhaps for something complimentary that he had printed about Aleck in *The Globe*," surmises Pemberton. Accordingly notices were sent out to ten carefully selected names, announcing a meeting of the chapter at which ten addresses were to be delivered, all by "A. Wolcot." (Misspelling of his name was a special annoyance to Aleck.) The place was the *Algonquin*. A felt pennant bearing the legend "A.W.O.L. cot Post" was stretched across a little-used corner of the room which was to become so famous later.

Eight out of the ten invited came, including Heywood Broun and Franklin P. Adams. The meeting was enlivened by a crossfire of choice insults between Aleck and Art Samuels, one of the few contemporaries who could hold his own with or even overmatch the critic at this sort of guerrilla warfare. Pemberton writes:

From then on we met there nearly every day, sitting in the south-west corner of the room. If more than four or six came, tables could be slid along to take care of the newcomers. We sat in that corner for a good many months. S. Jay Kaufman, who had got hold of a garbled version of the gag, actually thought that the purpose of the group was to revile him. He made several mentions of

it in his column. Other gossipers picked it up. Frank Case, always astute, moved us over to a round table in the middle of the room and supplied FREE hors d'oeuvre. That, I might add, was no mean cement for the gathering at that time. . . . The Table grew mainly because we then had common interests. We were all of the theatre or allied trades.

Gradually there took place an expansion beyond the theatre-world limitations, and the Round Table burgeoned in an atmosphere of intellectual stimulus, wisecracks, and table stakes poker, to endure through more than a decade as a landmark for highbrow rubber-neckery. Gertrude Atherton, in *Black Oxen*, the best-selling novel of 1923, has thus pictured the group of "Sophisticates," as she was the first to dub them, made up of "authors, playwrights, editors, and young editors, columnists, dramatic critics, young publishers, the fashionable illustrators and cartoonists, a few actors, artists, sculptors."

. . . at the Sign of the Indian Chief where the cleverest of them—and those who were so excitedly sure of their cleverness that for the moment they convinced others as well as themselves—foregathered daily. There was a great deal of scintillating talk in this group on the significant books and tendencies of the day. . . . It was an excellent forcing house for ideas and vocabularies. . . . They appraised, debated, rejected, finally placed the seal of their august approval upon a favoured few.

Celebrities, future celebrities, and near celebrities joined up: Marc Connelly, Deems Taylor, Frank Sullivan, Herman Manckiewicz Howard Dietz, John V. A. Weaver, Irving Berlin, Donald Ogden Stewart, Raoul Fleischmann, Russel Crouse, George S. Kaufman, David Wallace, Robert Sherwood, occasionally Harold Gould, J. M. Kerrigan, Sidney Blackmer, and a sprinkling of Broadway stars and rounders. A Ladies Annex attached itself to the group: Edna Ferber, Margolo and Ruth Gillmore, Alice Duer (Mrs. Henry) Miller, Peggy Wood, Jane Grant, Ruth Hale, Beatrice (Mrs. George S.) Kaufman, Dorothy Parker, Neysa McMein, Margaret Leech, Elsie Janis, and Alison Smith, afterwards Mrs. Russel Crouse.

Early leadership in the group went, by tacit consent, to F.P.A., due to his reputation, already national, his wit, and in some degree to his financial status as by far the highest paid newspaperman of the lot. He was (and is) a lean, sinewy man, faintly demoniac of expression, with a passion for Horatian odes and base-line tennis; fast as a boxer on his mental feet, and endowed with an intolerant manner masking

a tolerant mind. His assumption of ferocity is partly protective armour, not always effective, and partly innocent affectation.

Woollcott's healthy and, at times, almost humble respect for both Adams and Broun undoubtedly acted as a corrective to an egotism already manifesting itself. To that extent the Algonquin fellowship was good for his soul. As to which appealed the more to his underlying instincts of altruism, I offer no opinion; Adams's blithe disregard for personages, authorities, and sacred cows, plus his uncompromising insistence upon professional ethics, or Broun's flaming convictions and crusader zeal, so incongruous with that sluggish corpulence. Aleck admired unreservedly and perhaps equally the professional craftsmanship of both.

Most conspicuous intellectually of the feminine annex, at least to Woolcott's mind, were Mrs. Miller, Mrs. Parker, and Mrs. Kaufman. Mrs. Miller's character and mentality he considered far above her product as a novelist, while not belittling the agreeable quality of her fiction. He called Dorothy Parker "a combination of Little Nell and *Lady Macbeth*" and placed her, both for prose and poetry, in the first contemporary rank. His feeling for "Bea" Kaufman was more complicated; but her hard common sense, shrewd literary judgment, and sometimes ruthless wit commended her to his approval.

Chiefly because of these five people, the Algonquin association counted heavily in his life.

It is no injustice to state that the Sophisticates were pleasurably aware of their sophistication. They were not immune from a human vanity in being a charmed and closed circle, around whose roped-off exclusiveness lesser folk craned admiring necks. The Table became the arena of the wisecrackers. In fact, there is a legend, probably baseless, that the term originated there, though Shakespeare had anticipated it a few centuries with his "witcrackers."

Libellous and presumptively jealous outsiders accused the association of group posing. A contemporary denounced them as "the most determinedly coruscating bunch of self-igniting fireworks that ever sat around a table, touching each other off." There may have been some foundation for the charge that their more pungent epigrams were likely to be delivered in accents sufficiently penetrating to reach the ears of the outer populace. It is certainly true that the regulars hoarded their "smarties," watchfully awaiting or, if necessary, manœuvring for opportunity to slip them in to the best advantage. Dave Wallace com-

plained that he once lay in wait for five sessions before being able to swing the talk to prehistoric man, upon which he had prepared a specially snappy jape. Subsequently these scintillations would appear in one or another of the newspaper columns, which prompted an outsider to suggest that the members lived by taking in each other's joshing.

After a specially hilarious session when Connelly, Benchley, Sherwood, Dorothy Parker, and Ross pushed their way out, still shooting from the hip, Aleck observed regretfully:

"Oh, dear! There goes all the unsaleable wit in town."

To the rapidly expanding Round Table publicity, Frank Case attributes the adoption by the newspapers of the by-line. Seeing their own well-paid writers quoted by name in other mediums, the editors concluded that they might as well get the benefit of their staff men's wit—such paragraphs as "Frank Sullivan was heard to observe recently," or "As Bob Benchley said to a certain self-exploiting actor at the Algonquin." Messrs. Sullivan and Benchley were invited by their superiors to "save it for home use."

Outsiders came in only by invitation, and then at their peril. If they were obnoxious, or even if they were not, they were liable to be transfixed by some glittering insult from Aleck Woolcott's store, or be made the victim of a wholly gratuitous wisecrack by some member who had just thought of something funny. Or the snub might be deserved, as in the case of a blatant guest who was bragging of his ancestry, rousing George Kaufman from his habitual reverie long enough for the statement: "I had an ancestor, too. He went on the Crusades"—after a reflective pause—"as a spy, naturally."

The Algonquin preserves another Kaufman item among its unwritten archives, the call made by the young playwright upon a theatrical producer notorious for his habit of answering the bell of his apartment, stark naked. He was in this condition when Kaufman arrived. The caller, after a moment's hesitancy, said: "I beg your pardon, Mr. H——, but did you know that your fly is open?"

Aleck once brought to the Table Nancy, the seventeen-year-old daughter of his old benefactors, E. B. and Ivy Ashton Root. She was introduced to Edna Ferber, who, to her agonized embarrassment, held her up to public admiration in an extempore speech on the topic, "Oh, Youth! Oh, Beauty!" delivered with such eloquence that it was greeted by appreciative applause from hoi polloi.



Half the wisecracks of the next ten years were attributed to the Algonquin. Here were conceived, by common but not too reliable rumour, Dorothy Parker's quip: "If all the girls who attended the Yale Prom this year were laid end to end, it wouldn't surprise me a bit"; Irvin Cobb's epitaph for a beauty of notoriously general liaisons: "Here lies Polly Simpkins: asleep—alone—at last"; Frank Adams's example of a sentence embodying the word "meretricious": "Meretricious 'n Happy New Year"; and Heywood Broun's unprinted surgical lyric, composed on a hospital cot after a minor operation:

There was a young man with a hernia  
Who said to his surgeon "Gol-dernya,  
When carving my middle  
Be sure you don't fiddle  
With matters that do not concernya."

There has survived in the legends of the circle an episode, far from legendary, involving one of its members who would prefer to remain anonymous. He had an affair with an attractive young Broadwayite whose management of such matters was so inept as to result in her finding herself on several occasions "in trouble." From such embarrassments she was accustomed to extricate herself through medical aid. Learning, while on the West Coast, that the lady was in hospital again, the Algonquin addict surmised the cause, but not the attendant circumstances. He sent her two dozen American Beauty roses with an accompanying and what was intended as an encouraging message.

On this particular occasion the lady, weary of ill-fortune, had resolved to end it all and made a half-hearted attempt at suicide. Her first greeting from the outer world after she came out from under the drug was the telegram. It read: "Better luck next time."

The Algonquin profited mightily by the literary atmosphere, and Frank Case evinced his gratitude by fitting out a workroom where Broun could hammer out his copy and Benchley could change into the dinner coat which he ceremonially wore to all openings. Woollcott and F.P.A. enjoyed transient rights to these quarters. Later Case set aside a poker room for the whole membership.

With increasing fame, the Round Table became culturally self-conscious. There had not been a Cave of the Wits in New York since the 1850's, when there foregathered in Pfaff's beer cellar the High Bohemia of the period: Thomas Bailey Aldrich, William Cullen Bryant, Fitzgreen Halleck, Bayard Taylor, Henry Clapp, Edmund Clarence Sted-

man, Walt Whitman, and Artemas Ward. Granted that the Algonquin wits were closer akin to Ward than to Whitman, nevertheless the Round Table was to revive the intellectual glories of the beer hall and give to the intelligentsia of New York an inspiration and a focus. There was even a project to inaugurate a symposium, though nobody seems to remember who was responsible for the idea which came to nothing. The members did, however, put on a theatrical venture, a travesty of the then popular *Chauve Souris*, under the title:

NO SIRRE

An Anonymous Entertainment  
by the  
Vicious Circle of the Hotel Algonquin

It ran one night, the theatre being available only on Sunday, and should, in the inexpert opinion of the present critic, have run for one hundred. One of the playlets was (anonymously) by Alexander Woollcott. In another he appeared as Dreggs, the butler, with signal success. The troupe was, in its mingling of amateurs and professionals, undoubtedly the most distinguished ever to play a one-night stand. An estimate of its quality may be inferred from the casting of Jascha Heifetz in the humble role of Offstage Music. Besides the regulars of the lunchroom there appeared Helen Hayes, Louise Closser Hale, Tallulah Bankhead, Lenore Ulric, Winifred Lenihan, Mary Brandon, and June Walker. No Broadway manager could boast such a list.

The term applied to the one-night troupe survived for a time in Aleck's private correspondence. Some years after the show he was still employing it. A friend of those days, afterwards eliminated from his list as were so many others, received from him a French postal card with the greeting: "Dear Porcupine," and the address

Miss Peggy Wood,  
Vicious Circle, Algonquin Hotel,  
59 West 44th St.,  
N. Y. City, Etats Unis.

Inevitably the close corporation of the Round Table caused heart-burnings. Edna Ferber wrote in *A Peculiar Treasure*:

Outsiders took a kind of resentful dislike to the group. They called them the Algonquin crowd. I was astonished to find myself included in this designation. The contention was that this gifted group engaged in log-rolling; that they gave one another good notices, praise-filled reviews and the like. I can't imagine

how any belief so erroneous ever was born. Far from boosting one another they actually were merciless if they disapproved. I never have encountered a more hard-bitten crew. But if they liked what you had done they did say so, publicly and wholeheartedly. Their standards were high, their vocabulary fluent, fresh, astringent and very, very tough. Theirs was a tonic influence, one on the other, and all on the world of American letters. The people they could not and would not stand were the bores, hypocrites, sentimentalists, and the socially pretentious. They were ruthless toward charlatans, toward the pompous and the mentally and artistically dishonest. Casual, incisive, they had a terrible integrity about their work and a boundless ambition.

Accusations of mutual promotion and back-scratching were widely circulated. Aleck rose in defence. "Yes," said he, apropos of F.P.A.'s caustic review of a novel by Heywood Broun, "you can see Frank's scratches on Heywood's back yet."

George M. Cohan, for reasons possibly professional, hated the circle. "A Round Table without a square man at it," he declared. Frank O'Malley, who by reason of his wit belonged in the coterie, shunned it because he could not endure Aleck. That amiable plagiarist and monstrously successful purveyor of shoulder-rubbing metropolitan gossip to the sticks, O. O. McIntyre, who would probably have been met with a unanimous blackball had any member had the temerity to propose his inclusion, vented an occasional plaintive gibe at the expense of the group.

Thereby is shown a curious angle of the Woollcott character. He had consistently regarded McIntyre as non-existent until he read a memorable saying of the columnist delivered at a hearing before the New York legislature: "There are no illegitimate children: there are only illegitimate parents."

Aleck, with his habitude of superlatives, declared it to be the greatest epigram of the century. "Odd" (pronounced "Ud") McIntyre must have been sadly misunderstood, grossly underestimated; no man capable of such an utterance could be less than a high and noble soul. When, after the columnist's death, the writers of a motion-picture script put the fine apophthegm into Greer Garson's mouth, quite without credit, it is said that Woollcott wrote the producers a withering letter of which there is unfortunately no trace.

While it lasted, the Round Table was *sui generis*, or, at least, *sui temporis*. It could have existed nowhere else but in New York. Never were the bars let down; only the chosen could be regulars. To the awed

Philistine here was the place to listen in on decisions which would seal the fate of books and plays, if not of nations. To this day, out-of-town visitors respectfully request waiters to point out the spot where stood the Round Table.

Transplanted, the fine flower of sophisticate wit lost something of its bloom. The leader of the cult<sup>1</sup>—for Aleck soon usurped that distinction—filled two automobiles with his brain brothers and took them down to the Phalanx for a day. The ostensible purpose of the jaunt was “to find the first person ever insulted by Woolcott.” Failing in this quest, the trippers, all male, proceeded to their destination. But in that sanctuary of “the unbought grace of life” the bad manners of the group, natural to some, carefully cultivated in others, seemed raucous. The visit was not a success. The gently bred Bucklins were repelled. Julie, for once mutinous, suggested that the experiment be not repeated. Aleck, for once meek, agreed.

Although partly responsible for its dissolution, Aleck always recalled the sodality with a wistful nostalgia. He wrote to John Peter Toohey from a sick-bed less than a year before his death that he would like to see just once more “even those old chums that I still dislike with a waning intensity.”

Upstairs the literati played poker. Anywhere from five to a dozen of the regulars, together with accessions from the outer world, would sit down after dinner on Saturday night and stick to it until Sunday afternoon. Thanks chiefly to F.P.A.’s paragraphings, the Thanatopsis Literary and Inside Straight Club became almost as fabulous a feature of contemporary life as the Round Table. The game was table stakes: that is, there was a stated limit to the original investment. Each player set the amount before him; if and when it was exhausted, he was through for the evening. At the outset, the sum was fifty dollars. This being established, there was no other limit to the play. If a player

<sup>1</sup> For the negative as to Woolcott’s leadership, I quote from one of the original group. “He was never the chieftain or the lodestar. The proof is that others continued to go to the Table when Aleck was on strike and not in attendance. . . . There were many who were glad when Aleck wasn’t there. As for wit; I don’t think he was witty in the true sense. There was no spontaneity about his barbs. Benchley and Parker were truly witty, F.P.A. laboriously so, Ross honestly sardonic, George Kaufman brilliant, Herman Manckiewicz witty in a heavy, brutal way, and Heywood’s bad puns amusing. Visiting firemen seldom dropped pearls. The conversation and interests were all centripetal—the theatre and ourselves being the focal points. If Aleck won at cribbage or if he were in accord with the others concerning the opening of the night before he was in an expansive mood and amiable. But if he was out of sorts, he was merely rude and insulting.”

chose to shove in his whole pile on a pair of deuces, that was his privilege. Most of the circle were of modest financial status. One hundred dollars was a big evening's winning in the early days. Indeed, it was a week's salary or more for all but one or two.

It is a traditional feature of the Great American Game that stakes always go up and never down. New players of higher financial rank came in: notably Harpo Marx, Prince Antoine Bibesco, Montague Glass, Jerome Kern, Herbert Bayard Swope, Haldeman-Julius, the publisher of nickel classics, and Gerald Brooks, a successful Wall Street man with literary and artistic leanings. The normal stake rose to two hundred and fifty dollars, and then to five hundred dollars. It was still a social pastime with much good-natured byplay on the side. Woollcott was a constant and fairly successful player.

Participation was likely to be expensive for the casual guest. Having once been invited to sit in, I consulted "Gerry" Brooks: what were the chances for an outsider? He gave it earnest consideration and delivered his dictum.

"If you're good, you might have a thirty-three per cent chance. If you're just an ordinary player, twenty-five per cent. We regulars know one another's games too well. Better stay out."

I stayed out.

Outsiders did not invariably fare ill, however. An unidentified nabob, officially rated at six million dollars, sat down to the table with the deprecatory remark that he knew he had no chance, and when the last round of roodles was played one of the regulars went to the telephone to advise Dun & Bradstreet that the rating be changed from six million to six million four hundred and ten dollars.

A popular after-theatre sport of the favoured was to drop in and "kibitz," and many stars of the stage of both sexes were to be found among the onlookers. Only two women were ever admitted to the game, Neysa McMein and Mrs. Raoul Fleischmann. After being the recipients of much well-meant advice, they sat in for a night and retired, each with a tidy pile, remarking that the stakes were too high and, while they had greatly enjoyed it, they did not think they would care to play again.

Various traditions, customs, and observances grew up around the table, one of the most popular being the practice of signaling a flagrantly misplayed hand by all rising and intoning to the strains of the "Englishman" song from *Pinafore*:

"He remains a goddam fool."

As stakes went up, tempers became edgier. Quarrels broke out. Aleck was not happy. He blamed Swope for "changing a friendly game into a financial enterprise," not quite justly, as Swope was no more responsible for the more serious betting than was Harpo Marx or Gerald Brooks. Reports of winnings and losings circulated on Broadway, gaining lustre at the expense of accuracy as they flew. It was said that Aleck lost four thousand dollars in an evening, and protested pathetically, "My doctor says it's bad for my nerves to lose so much."

The sum is certainly apocryphal. One-eighth of the amount would be nearer the truth. Aleck took to laying five hundred dollars on the table as his stake, and when that was consumed he would say "Good night" and leave. Harpo Marx was credited with having won thirty thousand dollars between dinner and dawn. This he categorically denies.

"The most I ever won at one session is a few thousand dollars," he writes.

The game quit the Algonquin and went to the Colony, unregretted by Host Frank Case. Aside from the prestige accruing to the hotel, the account was written in red. No rental was charged for the room. As the crowd was little addicted to alcohol, the bar's profits were negligible. The wear and tear on carpets, hangings, and furniture was severe. The players formed an inconsiderate habit of dining elsewhere or even sending out and having food sent in. After one occasion when they had spilled an imported ice-cream freezer over the carpet, Mr. Case put up a sign:

#### BASKET PARTIES WELCOME

The sardonicism had no effect. The gathering place of the Thanatopsis Literary and Inside Straight Club continued to look, at dawn, like a Bowery parlour after the wake.

The general opinion of Aleck as a player was that he was cool of judgment, a deadpan bluffer, and possessed that prime virtue of the gambler, the fortitude to drop a losing hand. His besetting fault was that he wanted to dictate the rules and this in a group which did not take kindly to autocracy. A run of bad luck turned him melancholy, but not ill-tempered. Always the social and not the financial side of the game appealed to him. When the dollar chase predominated, he discovered that "poker is a preposterous waste of time" and withdrew, taking with him Brown and Marc Connelly.

Only once thereafter did he play. This was in Shanghai, at the house of an English couple, prominent in the foreign colony but of slightly tainted repute as gamblers. There is reason to believe that they received the bespectacled and innocent-looking American with unfounded anticipations. He won nine hundred dollars Mex, and firmly declined a return session.

The Thanatopsis died of the dollar. What caused the slower dissolution of the Round Table is not so clear. There was some inevitable scattering of the people who made up the circle. Alceck, himself, quit New York for the country. Others lost interest. The Round Table, as such, ceased to function in 1932. Any barbarian from outer darkness may now feed in that once hallowed spot. Some trailings of Sophisticate glory still persist, however. A handful of the old lot remain faithful to the place; alone of New York hotels, it preserves a literary aura.

One of the most nostalgic of the Woolcott reminiscences embalms it under the title, "Wayfarer's Inn."

### 13

#### THE EFFECTIVE BOOSTER

BETS were offered at the Algonquin that the Ross-Truax-Woolcott ménage would not last a year. Had Woolcott's plans worked out, the forecast would have been justified. At the supposedly discreet age of thirty-six, he underwent an emotional upheaval—object matrimony—from which he never wholly recovered.

Neysa McMein was a reigning toast of the Algonquin Sophisticates and the object of unrequited passion to several. Christened Marjorie Moran McMein, she had changed her name at the instance of a numerical sibyl who promised her wealth, success, and happiness under a more suitable formula. "Neysa" was prescribed and adopted. The sceptical may regard the sequel as a case of *post hoc* rather than *propter hoc*, since the subject, under any appellation, was endowed with a facile artistic talent, a quick wit, and a brilliant personality. "Beautiful, grave, and slightly soiled" is the picture of her as she appeared in her

studio to the enamoured Mr. Woolcott. The "slightly soiled," one hastens to add, is to be taken in a purely superficial sense as applicable to the illustrator's paint-smeared smock and fingers.

Woolcott, now cured of his disappointment over Jane Grant, had joined the court of Miss McMein's devotees, where the others never saw any occasion to be jealous of him.

Returning home one evening in early June 1923, Harold Ross heard a seismic tumult in the Woolcott apartment, and entered. There was their lodger, in a fine frenzy rolling about the room and hurling his impedimenta in all directions while uttering hoarse, despairing cries, the recurrent burden of which was "Lost!"

"What's gone now?" the visitor asked.

"My passport! My passport!"

"And this?" said Ross, lifting a document from the cluttered work-desk.

Like Poe's "Purloined Letter," it had been in plain sight all the time. Aleck thrust it into his pocket and began to pack, talking to Ross as he worked.

"I'm sailing for Europe to-morrow."

"What's your hurry?" asked his friend, surprised.

"Neysa's going to be on the boat. I've just found it out. I'm going aboard to-night." He disposed a neatly wrapped oblong in a suitcase. "A new parchesi board," he explained, this being the temporary fad of the set. "Won't Neysa be surprised when she comes to her deck chair to find me next to her with the board all laid out!"

Ross thought it probable. He inquired how long Aleck expected to be gone. Aleck did not know. It depended upon Neysa. Everything depended upon Neysa. Aleck's purpose was to ask her to marry him. He had great hopes of bringing her back as Mrs. Woolcott.

Everything worked out as planned, in the first stage. The lady did come up on deck to find her admirer in the adjoining chair, with his parchesi board in readiness. She did express surprise at seeing him. With her surprise was mingled an element which he failed to understand. It was not favourable to his ambitions; so much he presently suspected. Before landing, his inamorata made it clear to him; a few days earlier she had secretly married John G. Baragwanath, a handsome mining engineer.

Her hand having been forced by Aleck's marked attentions, she went on to Paris to announce her marriage in the European edition of the



*Herald*. Aleck returned to New York with his parchesi outfit and won fifty-two dollars from F.P.A. in one sitting.

In the twenty years following, Aleck had several other emotional attachments, greater or less in intensity. Of Neysa McMein he was never quite cured. At best he was sporadically convalescent.

It cannot truthfully be said that the rejected lover pined. On the contrary, he went on the town. Life took on the aspect of festivity. With more money at command than he needed, he forgot his former chief's counsels of moderation and frugality. Save up for a rainy day? Why? He was a rich young man, confidently intending to be richer. High, wide, and handsome was his device, and the proverbial drunken sailor his model of finance. He became and remained profligate in spending, gambling, and generosities. He frequented the most expensive restaurants, often accompanied by some equally expensive lady of the stage, the literary world, or the society pages. He was a liberal contributor to his college, his fraternity, and any other good cause in which he chanced to be interested. Anyone with the slightest claim upon his sympathies could successfully promote a "touch," whether of five dollars or five hundred. If the beneficiary were a friend, Aleck would say (and mean it): "When you are through with it, pass it on to some other low character."

He became a gourmand, then a glutton. His usual dinner was steak, a variety of vegetables, a rich dessert, an expertly chosen white wine or red burgundy, and always vast quantities of coffee. When he was forced to comparative moderation in respect of his favourite beverage, he wrote to my wife that she would find him a less troublesome house guest thereafter; he had cut himself down to nineteen cups per day. Between meals, he stuffed himself with chocolate. Against such a diet the most ostrich-like digestion is bound to mutiny at times. His method of treatment was on the heroic order. He once quelled a midnight colic with four Welsh rarebits, by way of "giving the rebellious tract something to think about. It worked." He grew fat to the verge of unwieldiness, but for years impatiently refused to let so minor a consideration interfere with the delights of the table. Not until discomfort became danger did he let up.

Their house partner's nocturnal loquacities wore upon the Rosses' nerves. Harold was working hard on plans for *The New Yorker*, as yet an embryo. He needed the sleep. Jane Grant was bored by the repeated Woollcott raids on her dinner parties. His newly acquired

valet, a self-confident coloured youth known as Junior, who patterned himself too faithfully upon his master to suit the Rosses, was a further complication. Regretfully they suggested to Aleck a termination of the compact, a hint which he accepted without hard feelings at the time. That spring of 1926 he went to Europe, leaving in Ross's custody his household goods, including thirty watches, gifts from theatrical producers and managers. It must not be inferred that this argued venality on the critic's part; nothing could be farther from the truth or more alien to Woolcott's character. It was simply an old Rialto custom for managements to make Christmas presents to critics. To refuse such gifts (though a few did so) was to risk mortal offence.

These particular donations did the recipient no good. Having deposited them with his friend he apparently forgot all about them; in any case, he never mentioned them to Ross. So when, years later, a Filipino servant made off with the lot, nobody was the worse for it.

Financial settlements were left hanging, wherefrom developed a letter, Woolcott to Ross, so typically Woolcottian that Crosby Gaige, theatrical producer and collector of *esoterica Americana*, paid the recipient twenty dollars for it. Ross subsequently thought that it had gone too cheap. Standards of value in the literature of diatribe are beyond my competency; the reader may judge:

Monday

Dear Ross,

I agree with you that the fewer dealings one has with you and the fewer debts one permits you to incur, the less chance there is to be subjected to your discourtesy. I have enjoyed your company so much that I have been one of the last to make this simple discovery. The remedy is even simpler.

It seems hard to believe that you really think I objected to your breaking a dinner engagement with me. As I was sound asleep upstairs, I didn't even know you hadn't come. I *was* a trifle revolted that you should have thought your casual imposition on the amiable Junior so richly comic. And your subsequent paroxysms of mirth made me a little sick. Any tyro in psychology recognizes that urchin defence mechanism, but the person who jeers at me when there is a good audience and waits for privacy to apologize is manifesting a kind of poltroonery I find hard to deal with.

Hawley<sup>1</sup> tells me that the money for my fourth of the house equipment is due from you. You will remember that we agreed to leave the fixing of the amount to him. He has, I believe, figured this out. Then you were to take over, I believe, some proportion of the \$325 I spent on my apartment. Will you send

me a cheque for this or your note for three months? I should be reluctant to burden you with more favourable terms. You can, if need be, borrow the money from some innocent who does not suspect how deeply he will thereby be incurring your antipathy.

I think your slogan "Liberty or Death" is splendid and whichever one you finally decide upon will be all right with me.

A. W.

In concluding the sale, Ross asked Gaige to bear in mind

... that the author of the letter is the gentleman who left for France last Spring failing, despite urging, to sign a cheque for losses at cribbage. He had to catch the boat. It sailed at 10 o'clock in the morning, and it was then 2 a.m.

Did these splenetics ruin an old friendship? Far from it. Upon the traveller's return, the association was renewed with unabated warmth, until a second sequel to the "Gash House" partnership temporarily roiled the water. Ross was sharing an apartment with Ed MacNamara, the "Singing Cop," who added to his musical ability a brilliant talent for cookery. Dining there, Aleck remarked with interest upon the design of the silver so remarkably like the family plate at the *Phalanx*. Where did MacNamara get it? MacNamara was not sure that it was his, nor could Ross place it. The guest reverted to the topic fitfully, until he discovered upon one of the less timeworn spoons an unmistakable *B*. It *was* the Bucklin silver, mistakenly turned over to the Rosses when the household split.

Aleck left in apparent good humour, went straight to a Western Union office, and sent a night letter in his most venomous vein. The implication was that he had been robbed of a precious family heirloom. Junior would be around with a basket that afternoon, and the silver had better be ready—or else! The silver was ready. A set of Woolworth replaced it. Nobody went to jail.

Meantime Aleck, with Junior in attendance, had taken up house-keeping quarters in the Hotel des Artistes at 1 West Sixty-seventh Street. To a selected list of friends he sent notice of his change, suggesting that a "surprise shower" for the new ménage would be appreciated, linen, china, and silver preferred. F.P.A. obliged with a handkerchief, a shaving cup, and a dime.

Julie Taber's husband had died, and friends suggested that she join her brother and preside over his large and elegant domicile. Others as earnestly dissuaded her. "It would be like living in the waiting-room of the Pennsylvania Station," they warned.

For several years now Aleck had relaxed his outside industry. Few magazine articles came from his pen in 1922, '23, and '24. The three books of his authorship in this period, *Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play*, *Shouts and Murmurs*, and *Enchanted Aisles*, were, for the most part, compilations of earlier work; there was little original labour on them. He did not, however, shirk his regular duties. His *Herald* output was as newsy and anecdotal as had been his *Times* columns.

But one labour-saving device now became more obvious, his repetitiousness. He would use an item in February and repeat it, with hardly a change of phrase, in April. The cynical journalistic apophthegm that the public never remembers to-day what it read yesterday, while not a Woollcott invention, became a Woollcott tenet. He took to what is technically known as "space-grabbing": i.e., padding his columns with frequent quotations, from Dickens, from Gilbert and Sullivan, and from favourite poems. One passage from *Nicholas Nickleby*, Vincent Crummles's recipe for playwriting, he used twice in successive months, a third time within the year, and very likely on later occasions. This reduplication grew to such formidable proportions later that editors were compelled to a special watchfulness, and a future secretary noted with dismay "his habit of for ever plagiarizing himself."

Other columnists might—and some did, orally—jeer. The proof of the newspaper pudding is in the reading. The *Herald's* public swallowed the Woollcott fare with unimpaired appetite. In the expert opinion of Charles M. Lincoln the Woollcott contributions to the *Herald* were worth every cent of what had at first seemed uncomfortably like a holdup.

Broadway's semi-official organ was *Variety*, owned and actively edited by a queer genius, Sime Silverman. Mr. Silverman's journalism was of the cockily independent sort. He did not give a damn for anyone and he did not care a damn who knew it. Managers, producers, backers, stars, and critics all looked alike to him; when he began swinging, the most august jaws were in jeopardy.

Mr. Silverman disliked and distrusted the Algonquin Round Table. He regarded it as a clique and, in spite of an habitual diversity of opinion among its members, believed that judgments upon the drama were there determined in conspiratorial conclave and duly delivered through the press.

"Those were the years," editorialized *Variety* subsequently, "when the critics strived [*sic*] more to turn a witty phrase than give a direct,

analysis of a play's chances," a shaft quite obviously aimed at Messrs. Woollcott, Nathan, Hammond, and the other clever pens.

At the time, Editor Silverman wrote in his rather unconventional English: "It is not alone our opinion but also of other observers of theatricals that the critics of the New York dailies do not continuously and exactly tell what they think or believe of every show they see." Hence *Variety* proposed to "approximate the sureness of critical judgment through a weekly résumé."

A star member of the staff, Jack Pulaski, was assigned to the job. Pulaski's investigations did not convict the "Algonquin clique" of conspiracy. They did result in establishing *Variety's* famous "Drama Critics' Box Score" which is to-day standard in the American theatre. In it each daily paper critic is listed as to his first-night opinion of the survival potentialities (not the merits) of each production, beneath captions of "Favourable," "Unfavourable," "No Opinion." It is coincidental and not significant of anything but chance that the man at the head of the list in the first appearance of the score was shortly supplanted in his job by the man at the foot. Stephen Rathbun was the leader; Alexander Woollcott, the tail-ender.

As the roster continued, Woollcott was pretty consistently low man on the poll. Once only did he rise as high as the medial mark. Vying with him for his lowly distinction was no less a personage than Percy Hammond. Heywood Brown, and John Corbin, who again succeeded to Woollcott's post on *The Times*, were other competitors for bottom place. If this proves anything, it would seem to indicate that knowledge of the drama and capacity to write of it with critical skill bear no relation to an ability to prophesy (or guess at) a play's chances with the public. Vide *Abie's Irish Rose*! It is said that Silverman had in mind that phenomenon in starting his innovation.<sup>1</sup>

One avowed purpose of the *Variety* feature was to dissuade the critics from neutrality. It succeeded. The weekly was able to state that as a result of the "box score, the critics' 'no opinions' virtually vanished." Whether consciously or not, Woollcott was probably influenced towards more positive forecast; in any case, he showed less hesitancy thereafter to put himself on record. This is as suitable a place as any to

<sup>1</sup> *Variety*, as a prophet, had an *Abie's Irish Rose* of its own. It forecast an early death for *Green Pastures*, on the ground that it was not good theatre. When, after a long run and an intermission, the Marc Connelly play returned to Broadway, going strong in its three-year stride, the weekly, in a spirit of mingled sportsmanship and self-derision, reprinted its original review word for word.

record that *Able's Irish Rose* outlasted its approving critic, Mr. Woollcott, on Broadway, and finally died a slow, lingering, and euthanasiac death six years and 2,326 performances after that opening night when with tearful eyes he had looked upon its amiable banalities and found them good.

Mr. Munsey wearied of the *Herald* as a losing investment. The paper passed into the hands of Ogden Reid, to be merged with the *Tribune*, "thereby reverting to journalism," as an anonymous editorial commentator put it, adding for good measure, "though it is difficult to say what the *Herald* can contribute to the *Tribune* except a possible hyphen."

It did not contribute Alexander Woollcott, who was transferred to the *Sun*, much to his distaste. Though it gave him more leeway for writing his articles, he did not like working for an evening paper. This may be taken as simple prejudice. The *Sun* had inherited a great tradition from the days of Dana, Mitchell, Lord, and Clarke, and was in all essentials of journalism superior to the *Herald*, besides affording its writers a wider audience. The only notable achievement connected with Woollcott's brief tenure of a desk there was his exploitation of the Four Marx Brothers.

Their opening in a lively "musical," *I'll Say She Is*, brought to the Casino most of the first-string critics, including the *Sun* man. The other reviewers treated the show approvingly; to Woollcott it was an event, a work of art. He sang his hilarious paean to the

. . . bright-coloured and vehement setting for the goings-on of those talented cut-ups, the Four Marx Brothers. In particular it is a splendacious and reasonably tuneful excuse for going to see that silent brother, that shy, unexpected, magnificent comic. . . . Surely there should be dancing in the streets when a great clown comes to town, and this man is a great clown.

For years Woollcott continued dancing to Harpo's harp, if not in the streets, in newsprint, magazines, and between book covers, not neglecting the other brothers and that picturesque and forceful old Jewish matriarch, the head of the family. When, after many years, Zeppo retired from the stage to become a theatrical agent, Aleck refused to deny a current newspaper rumour that he was about to assume the stage name of Marx and join the troupe. It pleased him greatly.

Another friend about whom Aleck wrote and rewrote and again wrote was that musical prodigy whom he put between book covers in *The Story of Irving Berlin*. It was just the sort of success story to appeal

most strongly to all that was Horatio Algerish in Aleck, this record of the tatterdemalion son of a destitute Russian rabbi who, from a news-boy, rose to become a singing waiter in a slum restaurant; thence through musical inventiveness and quiet ambition, plus a winning personality, established himself as his country's most popular composer and, to follow the fairy-tale tradition to the end, married the American substitute for a princess, a multimillionaire's daughter. Carping criticism might hold that friendship had carried Mr. Berlin's biographer beyond the limits of impartial judgment in bracketing "Oh, How I Hate to Get up in the Morning!" with the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as America's finest war song; and there is reason to believe that Mr. Berlin, whose essential sense of proportion has not been vitiated by success, entered a pained dissent.

Apropos of this comparison, which achieved some unfavourable comment at the time, an acquaintance of Woollcott's and Berlin's devised what he called a "concurrent legend" of both poems, on the principle of the deadly parallel. The high spot came in the fourth stanza.

VOICE: He hath sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat.

TRUMPET: I can't get 'em up: I can't get 'em up: I can't get 'em up this morning.

Whether for good or evil, the opus never attained public presentation. As the two persons mainly under suspicion, Frank Sullivan and Marc Connelly, both categorically deny any hand in the ribaldry, its authorship must remain, so far as this biography is concerned, a mystery.

In self-deprecatory moments Aleck would admit that he was something less than infallible as a judge of plays. Sometimes he would qualify this modesty by claiming a share of the credit for an American dramatic masterpiece.

One of those idiotic misconceptions to which show business is periodically subject, coloured the theatrical magnates' thinking for years after the World War. "Nobody wants to see a war play" was its shibboleth. Aleck had read in manuscript a war play by Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings which, in his opinion, everybody ought to want to see.

Lunching with Stallings at the Breervort, he saw Arthur Hopkins, the producer, at an adjoining table and beckoned him over.

"Stallings, here, has just finished a play that I think has a lot to it," began the critic.

Hopkins expressed an interest which was polite rather than fervid.

"You wouldn't want to read it, of course," pursued Aleck. "Being a producer, you never read plays. Besides, it's a war play."

Hopkins smiled. War play or not, he'd be glad to read it, he said. He did so. *What Price Glory?* was produced that season.

Poor picker of hits though Woolcott was in print, he was proud of his judgment of individual merit ("I claim to be clairvoyant about people," he once said), and with good reason. He is credited with having been influential in prodding two successful playwrights, George Kaufman and Charles MacArthur, out of journalism and on to the stage. Before the war he had dropped in upon an obscure vaudeville show one evening, and observed with approval the dancing of a graceful and nonchalant youth whose name on the playbill meant nothing to him. He told his associates, and two or three sceptical managers: "There's a kid hoofer around at the So-and-so that you ought to look over."

The "kid hoofer" was Fred Astaire.

Later he was charmed with the performance of a lariat juggler who talked to himself and through himself to the audience, while weaving his intricate patterns.

"You ought to go and see this fellow, Rogers," he advised Hamilton Owens. "He is rare."

Owens had never heard of Will Rogers, nor, for that matter, had anyone else in the higher domain of the theatre. However, he went, was ushered to a stage box, and in the darkness propped himself comfortably back, with his feet against the brass railing. The unknown Rogers made his entry, spied the critic, and improvised his opening line: "Take your feet off that rail, Ham. You're making me thirsty."

The Broadway grapevine gave it currency, and Will Rogers became a headline monologist, with his rope act relegated to the background, a mere accompaniment to his dry reflections on topics of the day. Broadway saw in him only an amusing humorist. Woolcott's perceptions probed deeper. He went to Harold Ross, then editing *Judge*, and urged him to take on the lasso operator as a regular contributor. The suggestion amazed Rogers; he had never thought of such a thing; doubted whether he would be any good in that line.

His modesty was misplaced. The writer in Woolcott had recognized



a fellow talent. After a promising magazine start, Rogers and his cracker-barrel philosophies were taken over by *Life* until a newspaper syndicate appropriated and made him a unique and phenomenally successful feature of contemporary journalism.

Neither Astaire nor Rogers was a friend of the critic's, either before or after the fact. Paul Robeson was an intimate and valued friend. Yet his first experience of Woolcott's critical faculty was set to the sour music of a jeer.

After graduating from Rutgers, where he was a Phi Beta Kappa and, incidentally, an All-American end, Robeson went to Columbia Law School. With no special leaning towards the stage, he seized upon an offer to play in *Taboo*, because he needed the seventy-five dollars per week which, rather to his surprise, it offered. Woolcott's commentary upon the neophyte actor was that he did not know where Robeson came from, but wherever it was, he'd better go back there. Robeson did not forget, but the critic did, and when the actor appeared in *The Emperor Jones* failed to recognize him and hailed him as a genius. He followed up his "rave" review by inviting its subject to a party. Then and there the budding friendship almost came to disaster when the host discovered his guest innocently superimposing a bottle of ginger ale upon a slug of Scotch.

Their mutual liking having survived this shock, the actor, with his wife, became a familiar of the Woolcott circle. Another of Robeson's early friendships in the literary world was with Heywood Broun. At one place or the other the actor, who had now abandoned his legalistic ambitions, would sometimes sit down at the piano and offhandedly sing negro songs, in a rich and effortless basso. Both critics became interested in his voice.

Why not give a concert? Robeson demurred. What did he know about singing? He'd never had any training. Aleck insisted that no training was necessary for folk songs as the actor was accustomed to singing them: he could almost guarantee success for them. The other was still unconvinced. So Woolcott and Broun took their case to Mrs. Robeson, who was then studying medicine. (She was afterwards chemist and technician in the Surgical Pathology Department of New York's Presbyterian Hospital.) The three ganged up on the reluctant songster and finally bullied him into giving a concert "for unmusical people," as he now puts it. It was successful enough to be followed by others. Not until New York went mad over the Robeson rendition of "Old

Man River" in *Show Boat* was there general recognition of one of the great contemporary human instruments. It can hardly be claimed that Woolcott and Broun were responsible for Paul Robeson's gift to American music. But certainly they forwarded its timely development.

Not content with impressing upon the world the dramatic merits of his friends the Marxes, Aleck, by some unexplained percipience, discerned in Groucho a talent for writing which that performer proved by sprightly contributions to current columnar literature but never followed up to its full potentialities. If Groucho could do it, said Woolcott, why couldn't Harpo? The silent brother was willing to try. He produced for F.P.A.'s rhymed automobile symposium in "The Conning Tower" the following masterpiece of brevity:

Nashes to Nashes;  
Stutz to Stutz,

and, in despair of bettering perfection, thenceforth rested upon his lyrical laurels.

## I4

### MURIEL AND OTHERS

PUBLIC men of the period were inured to hearing a voice, staccato and peremptory, address them in telephonic quickfire:

"This is Swope. Swope-o'-*The-World*. Is it true that you——" and so on.

Herbert Bayard Swope had been the best reporter in New York, the best city editor in New York, and was now the only Executive Editor in New York, a title which he had capitalized for his own use. Swope's practicality was an effective foil to the idealism which Ralph Pulitzer had inherited from his father, the mighty Joseph, to make *The World* the most vital daily publication in America. To an innate news sense (there is no other kind, so far as I am aware) Swope added tireless energy, indestructible self-confidence, a searching and analytical mind, an encyclopaedic command of facts, and a far-ranging imaginative quality. The measure of his journalistic breadth of interest is indicated in the following episode.

A group of newspapermen were discussing that ever-recurrent surmise: what would be the most sensational front-page story of the century? The usual trite responses were made: collapse of the Brooklyn Bridge at the six-o'clock hour; discovery of perpetual motion; Wall Street blown up by dynamite; elopement of Lillian Russell with the Bishop of New York; earthquake on Broadway, and so on. Swope, then comparatively new to Park Row, said quietly: "First, proof of life after death; second, communication with Mars or some other planet."

Ralph Pulitzer, an abler journalist than he got general credit for being, since he worked in the posthumous shadow of his father, was building up with Swope's aid a "page-opposite-editorial" unique in American journalism before or since. As first-string dramatic critic, Heywood Broun was one of the features.

Broun was chafing. The theatre was not his prime interest, any more than baseball had been in an earlier employment. A devoted and impatient liberal, he wanted to spread himself on political, economic, and social questions. He was primarily a preacher of and crusader for a new and better-balanced social cosmos. *The World* was his logical platform, the Rialto no better than a strait-jacket to his ambition and his capacity. The astute Swope, when he hired Broun, foresaw that no pent-up Broadway could contract his powers indefinitely, and had an eye out for his successor. When Alexander Woollcott, bound by a Munsey contract, was turned over to the *Sun*, Swope went after him.

He was an easy captive. He signed a three-year contract with *The World*, operative as soon as his term with the *Sun* ran out, at \$15,000 a year, with a thirteen-week vacation. His new job began in August 1925.

Woollcott found *The World* congenial. F.P.A. had preceded him, transferring his "Conning Tower" and the "Diary" from the *New York Tribune*. Broun initiated his column "It Seems to Me," which at once became a leading voice of liberal thought. Laurence Stallings, Deems Taylor, that blazing and short-lived comet William Bolitho, Harry Hansen on books, and Charles Michelson on politics shared the page. On the editorial side, Frank Cobb, one of the mighty incognitos of the fourth estate, had given to the paper's editorials a power, distinction, and purpose which made them quoted across the nation, ably seconded by Walter Lippmann, just rising to national stature. Rollin Kirby, the most important cartoonist since Nast, was brilliantly sup-

porting and supplementing with his pencil the policies of Cobb's and Lippmann's pens. More occasional contributors to the paper over a period of years were H. L. Mencken, Ring Lardner, Frank Sullivan, and John Balderston. Any newspaperman might well be proud of an invitation to join such a community. Woollcott was, and made no bones of it.

Only that pride held him to his job. For he soon fell afoul of Swope. It is a tenable assumption that Aleck was becoming a little spoiled. Or it may have been no more than the gamin experimentalism ever latent in his soul which inspired him to pick up his chalk and use *The World* as his back fence, in a review of a show called *Arabesque*, couched in terms so "filthy" (the word is Swope's) that the Executive Editor killed it *in toto*. Aleck sulked for a week.

Swope's office memos were known for conciseness rather than tact. In his former employments, the critic, practically exempt from the blue pencil of the copy desk, had come to feel himself above correction or criticism. It was a sharp blow to his pride when he received an executive-editorial notice that a Sunday-page glorification of his friend Groucho Marx was not only a flagrant bit of space-grabbing, but was "particularly unfunny" into the bargain. Woollcott went about the office, darkling and muttering threats of resignation. He had never been treated that way in his life. The Marx story was one that any other paper in New York would grab at. If Swope didn't appreciate his stuff, plenty of others did. He'd resign. They could tear up the contract, for all he cared. He was sick of it, anyway. He made such a fuss that one of his co-workers brutally advised him to go home, let down his hair, and have a good cry; he'd feel better for it. Swope was not impressed, and Woollcott grumbled himself out of it.

Eugene O'Neill's play *Strange Interlude* was announced for production. It had already appeared in book form and had been unfavourably reviewed by Woollcott in *Vanity Fair*. On the reasonable ground that a reviewer who had formed and expressed a prejudgment on a work could not be expected to view it with an unbiased mind, Swope assigned the assistant reviewer, a quiet young man named Jeffrey Holmesdale, to the opening. Critic Woollcott stamped into the executive office with fire in his eye.

"What's this about *Strange Interlude*?"

"Holmesdale is covering it."

"Why?"

"You're already on record against it."

"I'm the first-string critic of this paper," rasped Woollcott, "and any O'Neill play is a first-string production."

The time was come for a showdown. Whether by chance or with well-judged psychological appeal, Swope sounded the military note.

"That's all very well, Aleck," said he coolly. "But I'm top-sergeant here, and what I say goes."

Aleck turned and left the office. It may have been an error on the executive's part, but he *thought* that his subordinate marched out. There was never any further office clash between them.

Though a prickly customer as an employee, Woollcott was the easiest of bosses in his own department. His assistants were always treated with the utmost consideration apart from an impish delight in catching them up. He was paternally devoted to young Alison Smith, who made up the Sunday theatre page, and of whom—so he was given to assuring her to her wrath—he "would make a newspaperwoman yet." One day she planked down upon his desk a dummy of the next Sunday's page.

"There, you old Simon Legree," she addressed her superior. "See if you can find anything to beef about in *that*!"

At the first glance, Aleck picked up a blue pencil and "ringed" two photographs, whilst musically intoning *The World's* editorial motto, "Accuracy, Terseness, Accuracy."

The pictures were labelled respectively "Katharine Collier" and "Constance Cornell."

Though he had plenty of money for all his needs, Woollcott set out to make more. Presumably he was experimenting with a view to determine whether and when he could afford to abandon the security of the weekly pay envelope. Several lecture dates gave him encouragement: he was well received by his small-city audiences. Less happily, so his friends considered, he proceeded to commercialize the industriously constructed figure which he had built up for the public eye. Stating it bluntly, he sold out for cash.

The buyer was a ten-cent cigar called Muriel. It would be an adventure into the unprovable to say that Alexander Woollcott never in his life smoked a cigar, but, so far as I can discover, nobody ever caught him at it. Nevertheless, he appeared, flatteringly pictured in the advertisements with a Muriel (presumptively) between his lips, as illustra-

tion to a testimonial which said practically nothing, in coy pretence of address to a lady (Muriel again) with whom he had been supposedly consorting. He was carrying out the title of the series, which was, as can be proved to doubting Thomases by recourse to the 1925 newspaper files, "Confessions of Muriel Lovers"! F.P.A., a stickler for journalistic ethics, took him to task for it in "Pepys' Diary," adding a footnote: "As he was not a smoker, I considered it dishonest."

So did the testimonial-giver, in his heart. A later sale of his name for much more money he admitted to be "a faintly discreditable business." It was too profitable, however, to abandon. With wry humour, he once called up his former secretary, Danton Walker, who had become an important columnist, and said: "I am constantly revolted by pictures of you endorsing some sort of cigar. Who do you think you are: Alexander Woollcott?"

Testimonials pay double. They settle for cash and they contribute to publicity. Alexander Woollcott was a "featured" name, not only as a signature to his own material, but also as a minor oracle. Other columnists quoted him. His *bons mots* gained in currency; interviewers sought him. He distrusted interviews as too likely to impair the presentment of himself upon which he was constantly labouring. There was a way to ensure a proper presentation: write the interview himself. This he did when the *Daily Princetonian* sent an undergraduate reporter to him, with the following result:<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Woollcott . . . is the old, or at least middle-aged, crosspatch who reviews the drama for the morning *World*. It has been charmingly said of him that if he were to be found murdered on some chill dawn, by ten o'clock of the same morning the police would have rounded up 2,000 suspects.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Woollcott was breakfasting at high noon when he was discovered by a *Princetonian* reporter, who made a mental note to become a dramatic critic as soon after graduation as practicable. Your correspondent at once put the great question by which dramatic critics are thrown into confusion.

"How," he asked, "do you account for *Able's Irish Rose*?"

"How," replied the annoyed critic, "do you account for Calvin Coolidge?"

At this rate the interview would get nowhere.

So your correspondent started again:

"Isn't *Able* the most popular play in America?"

<sup>1</sup> I have no authority for this surmise other than the internal evidence of the style. If this be not purest Woollcott, then Princeton harboured some unsung imitative genius.

<sup>2</sup> An eighteen-hundred-and-fifty increase to Thomas Ybarra's estimate.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Then who does know?"

"Well," said Mr. Woollcott, as he dunked his breakfast roll thoughtfully in his coffee, "you might go up to Yale and ask Professor George Pierce Baker. He recently brought his entire class down to study this curious phenomenon of a play that has already passed the 1,500th performance and is still going strong. I believe they are going to issue an explanation shortly. When that is settled I hope they will let me know why 'Yes, We Have No Bananas' swept this country like the black plague, and why the best-known poem in the English language is 'Little Drops of Water, Little Grains of Sand.'"

"But——" began the reporter.

"And why 'The End of a Perfect Day' has sold more copies than any song written in this century. For if that is a great song, then *Abie* is a great play, and I," Mr. Woollcott added modestly, "am the lost Dauphin."

"But isn't Professor Baker supposed to know these things?"

"By the Yale trustees, possibly. He, himself, I imagine, realizes that the secret of universal appeal is as difficult to trace as the unknown impurity in Dr. Jekyll's potion which made him act so funny."

"But Professor Baker is a great teacher, isn't he?"

"I don't know," said the critic bleakly.

"Well," said the reporter, who was growing discouraged by this time, "didn't Eugene O'Neill take the Baker Course in playwriting at Harvard?"

"Yes," said Mr. Woollcott, "after he had entered Princeton and then left it with almost disconcerting haste."

"And with his plays acted now not only in every college, but in London, Paris, Berlin, and Moscow, isn't O'Neill the foremost American dramatist?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, doesn't that prove that Baker is a great teacher?"

Mr. Woollcott grew pensive.

"My own college," he said quietly, "was Hamilton, and if you tell me you never heard of it you can go to hell. For many years, before Elihu Root became widely known as its most illustrious alumnus, that post was occupied in the public eye by Alonzo Whiteman. Lon Whiteman was easily the most adroit, the most expert and the most brilliant forger this country ever produced. Yet I have always felt that Hamilton was wrong in its naïve boast that this reflected high honour upon its classes in penmanship. I think that Whiteman might have been as celebrated even if he had gone to Colgate, or even if he had never gone to college at all."

But at this point Ann Pennington dropped in to lunch and your correspondent was thrown out.

This was too good to be wasted upon a college magazine alone. Ever expert at labour-saving expedients, Mr. Woollcott, the author and subject of the interview, transferred it bodily to the Sunday page of Mr. Woollcott the critic, honourably giving credit to the *Princetonian*, and lightening the burden of the day by a good third.

Through 1927 Woollcott's value to his paper increased. His contract terminated in May 1928. Swope offered a two-year renewal at an advance of \$1,000 a year, and suggested a syndicated article to bring in more money. Liberal though the proposal was, it was coldly received. The critic was becoming bored with his routine. "The neurasthenia of the deadline" pressed upon him. Consulting his mirror, he thought to perceive "the harried look of the schoolboy who has too much homework." Playgoing he had come to consider "hardly a career which a decent man would deliberately map out for himself" and dramatic criticism a dangerous trade, as "tending to rot the mind." Mother was right, though, at the time, she had shocked him by guessing that his new line of endeavour would prove "very narrowing." By 1928 he had attended, as he reckoned, two thousand play openings. It was too many. He revolted from being a unit in the wearily repetitious first-night audiences, those "fretful and lethargic assemblages which depress the actor when the curtain goes up. . . . For reasons which are many, obscure, and complicated, our theatre has lost most of its festivity and the average audience looks less like a group that has come to a party than like a haphazard collection of irritated passers-by who have been forced to take refuge . . . to escape the congestion of the sidewalks outside."

Once more the restless soul found itself "incurably disposed" to a change. All ambition had been fulfilled. If not the recognized deacon of his craft, Woollcott was, at least, its most conspicuous and controversial representative. *Variety's* scoreboard might expose his fallibility as a prophet; he was, notwithstanding, the theatre's most influential mouthpiece with the non-theatrical public. The Critics Circle testified to this belief in awarding him its silver-mounted cane for outstanding services to the stage as an institution.

Apart from his quality as a reviewer, where his status is still a moot question, he was unsurpassed as a dramatic editor; unequalled, in the opinion of many of his contemporaries. Technically for make-up and presentation, popularly for readability, his theatre page, whether in *The Times*, the *Herald*, the *Sun*, or the *World*, was a model. How his



rivals variously ranked him as an authority has already been indicated. Here is an opinion from the other side of the fence. His former assistant, Brock Pemberton, had become a producer, and it is partly from the viewpoint of management that he writes:

No one writing about the theatre in his time was as provocative or brought as much gusto and excitement to his subject. His emotions overrode his judgment, making his hates and enthusiasms superlative. This amusing hysteria, a reflection of his personality, whipped up interest in the theatre and was therefore good for it, but it was hell for those on the receiving end.

Determining his place as a formative influence in the contemporary drama is another matter involving a different measure of values. That he was supreme in his capacity for estimating and for creating theatrical news, that he was in his own department, as Frank Vreeland judged him, "a great and spirited and beguiling writer," is short of the question. It would be difficult to-day to trace in stage presentations or stage methods any influence exerted by Woollcott's writings. He was a temporary corrective; at times, a salutary purge. But his critiques did not strike down into fundamentals.

The reason is plain. He was always more concerned with the player than the play, with the interpretation than with the theme. In his mind the stage was primarily a vehicle for the actor, not for the playwright.

The reflex of this is implicit in his career. He cared little about writing plays; he cared intensely about acting in them. He would rather have been Harpo Marx than George Bernard Shaw, any day.

John Mason Brown in his book, *Upstage*, thus sums up the Woollcott method and value:

Call it personal. Call it sentimental, silly, trivial or what you want. But do not blind yourself to your own interest in what Mr. Woollcott has said, or the interest it may hold for distant historians. If he dodges first causes, avoids hair-splitting and ideas, he does create the living image of his passing pleasures. And he gives those very facts, those seemingly inconsequential sidelights for which the sober judges, faced with principles, have no time. When the historians of the future begin to look back on this present-day stage of ours the principles will not have vastly changed. But the gossip, the people, and the small talk will be forgotten; and the sidelights dimmed. And it is to Woollcott they will turn, as we turn to Pepys, for those grains of gossip which make the mighty history. They will turn to him as we do to-day, in grateful relief at finding him content to be Woollcott and no more.

To Alexander Woolcott, critic, it had all been great fun. Now he was wearied of it. The rigorous demands of daily journalism had begun to wear him down. Its romance never palled. Years after his self-emancipation from the treadmill, he could write of it in this exalted vein:

I count it a high honour to belong to a trade in which the good men write each piece, each paragraph, each sentence as lovingly as any Addison, and do so in the full knowledge that by noon the next day it will have been used to light a fire or saved, if at all, to line a shelf.

He quit the newspaper business, trailing clouds of sentiment for it which were never dissipated.

## 15

### THE FREE-LANCE

FREE-LANCING always involves a risk. Woolcott's adventurousness justified itself at once. Abandonment of the pay envelope, instead of involving a temporary lapse of income, proved immediately profitable. Soon he was making more money than either Munsey or Swope had paid him, spending lavishly, and saving without effort.

Extravagance with Woolcott did not deteriorate into dissipation. High living was never permitted to interfere with hard work. In the latter half of the 'twenties, beside his editorial commitments to *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*, he was contributing copiously to *Collier's* and occasionally to *Cosmopolitan*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Pictorial Review*, and lesser publications, and had inaugurated a long-lasting series of book reviews for *McCall's Magazine*, which he supplemented with frequent articles.

The latter years of the 1920-30 decade were enriched by two prodigies of professional foresight, Evangeline Adams's vision that Al Smith would be overwhelmingly elected President of the United States and the pied pipings of the oracular Roger W. Babson, leading the Prosperity Boys in the Buyers' Parade.

Less sophisticated in finance than in the arts, the Algonquin crowd enthusiastically joined the wildest Wall Street buying stampede in

history. Of course, they bought on margin, this being the sure road to profit as everyone knew who heeded the dictum of the elder Morgan (subsequently somewhat discredited) never to sell America short.

Nobody knows just how heavily Woollcott was involved. Probably he did not know himself. But his paper profits were certainly more than a quarter of a million dollars, and quite possibly close to four hundred thousand.

When the shining structure of a phony boom crashed, there was weeping and wailing among the Sophisticates, not participated in by their leading spirit.<sup>1</sup> As his friends knew from repeated experience, Aleck could rage and rant over a ten-dollar loss at croquet; he could kick a backgammon board high in the air or hurl a pack of cards into the fireplace with hideous imprecations. Now, finding himself wiped out and owing seven thousand dollars, he mildly observed that a broker is a man who takes your fortune and runs it into a shoestring. Reverting philosophically to that episode, he wrote to Grace Root:

In the empty, silly, noisy years which immediately preceded the Wall Street crash of 1929, I used to get hot tips on the market from big shots. I suppose they rather fancied themselves in the role of Maecenas, giving a financial lift to someone more literate (and therefore more incompetent and idiotic) than themselves. No good ever accrued from these tips except the potential benefit which anyone can experience by merely losing all his money.

Within a year the debt was cleared and the shorn lamb was growing another and thicker coat. He had had his lesson. Nobody ever heard him complain of the cost. He was through with Wall Street except for purposes of solid investment. If he wished to lose money, he reflected, he could do so by loaning it to impecunious friends with more satisfaction than was to be derived from watching a stock ticker string out interminable minus signs.

He cherished one memory of the crash which, he used to state blithely, was almost worth what he had lost. It was an episode related by Mrs. Percy Hammond about an opulent neighbour of theirs at Easthampton. This gentleman returned to his palatial home and grounds, pale and nerveless, declaring that he had lost four million dollars and all was over. He then discharged three gardeners, five stablemen, the first and second butlers, the assistant chauffeur, all the miscellaneous

<sup>1</sup> An incidental casualty of the crash was the Thanatopsis. Table stakes poker cannot be played on margin.

employees he could find, and the pastry cook. Emerging from retirement the following week, he sat down to his books and discovered, with the relief of a drowning man who has just found an opportune straw, that he had nearly three and a half million dollars left, whereupon he abandoned the notion of walking out of his twentieth-floor office window as several of his weaker confrères had done, rehired his beagle trainer, and took up life where he had left off, though on the modified scale of one reduced to near penury.

Hard times followed the crash for the writing trade in general, but not for Alexander Woollcott. Not only did he maintain his output, but he raised his prices. He became, so far as I can discover, the highest-paid book reviewer in history. Again, as in the early days of his dramatic criticism, he had initiated pioneer methods, and thus enlisted the interest of a new public. He got people to reading books who had never read before, by introducing the chatty, familiar, human-interest note. He had a neat trick of anecdote and reminiscence wherewith to spice his disquisitions and relieve them from the taint of the highbrow attaching generally to literary critiques. He would recall, apropos of a homespun novel, that Walter Hines Page, before he became Ambassador to Great Britain, rejected *David Harum* as "too vulgar." A notice of journalistic memoirs reminded him that the King of Italy cherished a romantic ambition to become an American reporter, if and when the business of royalty played out. He liked to inform or remind his readers that Alfred Housman made his debut over the *nom de plume* of Terence Hearsay; that Sarah Bernhardt played Ophelia one hundred times before she knew how the play ended, her interest dying with the death of the hapless maiden whom she depicted; that the convincing local colour of the tropical novel, *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, emanated not from observation but from the fancy of Sylvia Townsend Warner, who had never been within thousands of miles of the South Seas; that Shangri-La's high and lost peaks and vales were created by one "whose travelling, I believe, had been limited to a fortnight in a Swiss pension"; that Franz Schubert, wasting away in poverty, asked for the latest J. Fenimore Cooper novel; that Bennett's full name was Enoch Arnold Bennett and he had had two wives; that one line of Anthony Hope's is literally graven in bronze, the elegy for W. S. Gilbert, "His Foe was Folly & his Weapon Wit"; that Barrie financed the ill-fated Scott expedition to the South Pole; that Paul Robeson, though a Phi Beta Kappa and an all-American end at Rut-

gers, never made the Glee Club, and that the "unknown" line of "poetry" cut into the stone of the Yale Library is neither unknown nor poetry, being, in fact, the opening sentence of the best-selling novel, *Scaramouche*: "He was born with the gift of laughter, and a sense that the world is mad."

An insight into the storehouse of the Woolcott mind and the sources of his allusive method is afforded in one of his *New Yorker* articles:

A name glimpsed in an obituary column, a stray phrase overheard in a jostling crowd—such cues are enough to conjure up whole forgotten chapters out of books you closed a score of years ago.

The *McCall's* series began under the caption "Reading and Writing," but, after the reviewer got his L.H.D. from Hamilton, changed to "Dr. Woolcott Prescribes," the bearer's only professional use, so far as I know, of that academic emolument. What Dr. Woolcott prescribed, the public was generally ready to take. In the publishing trade he was regarded as a literary supersalesman. Evidence is not lacking to indicate that he saw himself in the same light. It became his habit to "get out the old drum," as he phrases it, and beat a resounding tattoo of praise for some worthy work which had missed public notice, when this sort of thing appealed to him as "calling for intervention."

"I intervened," he writes in lordly style about James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, which was dying unnoticed. Woolcott's drumbeatings not only resuscitated it, but lifted it into the best-selling list. He had previously done a like service for the same author's *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, of which he was not the discoverer as was universally believed. The story, which ran serially in *The Atlantic Monthly*, was read by Joseph Hennessey, Woolcott's business manager and general factotum, who rightly guessed that its gentle sentimentalism would appeal to his chief. The critic "went quietly mad" over the tale, persuaded Little, Brown & Co. to publish it, and by his own unaided (except for the book's own merits) exertions boosted it into a best seller. A later attempt to do the same for Hilton's *We Are Not Alone* failed. Another abortive enthusiasm was a macabre tale which Woolcott strove to promote by having a rubber stamp made and imprinting upon all his correspondence the legend "Have you read *The Whistler's Room*?" Few of his correspondents had or did; the total circulation fell short of twenty-five hundred. Afterwards he included the work in one of the *Woolcott Readers*.

As a rule, however, a favourable review from Woolcott's pen was

followed by an immediate and marked jump in sales. So highly did the magazine regard the page that it paid \$2,500 per issue for it, which works out to considerably better than one dollar per word. As to his success in this field, F.P.A. judged it to be achieved "not only because he writes so well, but because he takes so passionate and consuming an interest in his subject."

To his literary criticism he brought the same adroitness of presentation that had distinguished and popularized his dramatic reviews, though less, I think, of excitement. Of the two departments, the stage had precedence in his heart. His innermost motivation was that of the actor rather than the author; showmanship enlivens his writings as well as his career and, in the former, at least, is a virtue. His new development broadened his contacts with and enhanced his importance in the world of letters, though his own books had not as yet given him any considerable status either with the public or the craft.

Innovations in the field of everyday life roused Woolcott's suspicions; it was a curious contradiction to his radicalism in politics and social questions, where he was habitually for the new as against the old. He viewed the early radio with resentment. When Irving Berlin made him a Christmas present of a huge and ornate mechanism, he was disgusted.

"I packed the thing back to him by the same van," he told Frank Vreeland with relish. "I wouldn't have one of the damned things around my place."

But radio was now broadening its field and becoming so potent a fulcrum for the leverage of ideas and causes that Heywood Broun amended Fletcher of Saltoun's old saw by declaring his indifference as to who wrote his country's songs, provided he could have exclusive broadcasting privileges. It dawned upon Woolcott that perhaps this new medium might be made to order for him. Primarily he was a raconteur, a teller of stories; was not the viva voce approach a more appropriate method for him than the printed page? The first offer found him receptive.

"It's a thing I have been wanting to do for years," he wrote to Lilly Stehli Bonner, "and now they are letting me try it. After a month of experiment I ought to be pretty good."

He made his debut with the Mutual Broadcasting System on Station WOR in September 1929, with a company that sold radio sets as

sponsor. WOR was and is a pioneering outfit, willing to take chances in exploration of the developing entertainment field. They believed that Woollcott, with his folksy approach and his fund of personal reminiscences of the great and near-great, was a good prospect. Furthermore, his theatrical connections, unsevered by his retirement from daily-paper criticism, would enable him to recruit stage headliners, who would be glad to appear for the publicity value.

The impresario end was conducted by Paul Davis (inventor of the Town Crier device for Woollcott's use), and his associate, Leonard S. Smith, who employed the persuasive power of the Woollcott name and prestige to bring in such luminaries as George M. Cohan, Eddie Cantor, Fred Allen, Father Duffy, Gertrude Lawrence, Heywood Brown, Libby Holman, Ralph Rainger, Clifton Webb, and Walter Winchell. Impresario Smith recalls that at one time or another Woollcott insulted, patronized, or ignored all his fellow performers except Father Duffy.

It is a reasonable assumption that, with his almost bumptious *savoir faire*, Woollcott would be a calm and confident mike-speaker. But the little circular mechanism has been known to strike terror into performers far more experienced in public approach than Alexander Woollcott, with his record of amateur drama and a few lecture appearances: for example, such veterans as Will Rogers, Elsie Janis, Eddie Cantor, and David Wark Griffith, all of whom were thrown into abject jitters when they first confronted the metal mouthpiece. Woollcott was not in much better case. He approached the test with apparent composure, but the blank, unresponsive aspect of the instrument which carried his words to an unseen and therefore terrifying audience "got" him. Roger Bower, in charge of the programme, tried to steady him, but he became wheezy and breathy. His sibilants hissed spitefully. His tongue clacked. He lost his sense of timing. His words, as he painfully read, were being distorted by that mysterious and malevolent little contraption into something quite alien to himself. He staggered to the finish in a cold sweat. All Director Bower's tact was required to persuade him that he was not so bad as he believed himself and would be better at the next trial.

At the neophyte's request, a new form of microphone was constructed, the tube coming up from under so that he could read over it. This was better, though it furnished little indication of the phenomenal success he was to achieve.

Notwithstanding the leader's ineptitude of delivery, the programme "went over big" from the moment when Walter Winchell introduced Woollcott with Tom Ybarra's wisecrack about the hundreds of actors who would be arrested on suspicion if the critic were found dead, and Aleck followed up by presenting Heywood Brown as "two hundred pounds of soiled linen."

It brought a rush of orders to the radio-set manufacturing company which, in its overhaste to meet the demand, turned out defective instruments and went into receivership. At the close of its thirteen-week contract, the Gruen Watch Company stepped in and took over Woollcott for a like period.

It is quite in character that, though yet unproven in personal drawing power, Woollcott in those early days set an exorbitant commercial valuation upon his radio services. Friends in Utica sought to enlist him in a nation-wide search for Mrs. Beecher Crouse, a prominent matron of that city who, in November 1929, had left her house at dead of night without any ascribable reason, and completely disappeared. Woollcott had known the family when he was in college, though not intimately. Would he be interested in helping? He would, at a price. What was his price? Twenty-five hundred dollars for one broadcast. He was then receiving three hundred for his commercials. The matter was dropped. Mrs. Crouse's body was found in the canal not far from her home, at the spring ice-breaking.

Others set a much lower estimate upon his radio appeal, even in his special field. Harry Hansen is authority for the statement that the publishers "passed the hat" to make up the \$500-per-week purse for the Woollcott book talks, and thinks that these were "less than thirty per cent effective," upon what basis of reckoning he does not explain. "Nothing could be more misleading," he thinks, "than to say that Woollcott held the power of life and death, literally speaking, over anyone who published a book." Bennett Cerf, who heartily disliked Woollcott after an exchange of left-handed amenities which resulted in Random House publications being barred from mention by the critic, does not agree. He writes, in *Try and Stop Me*: "He turned several books into best sellers, singlehanded. . . . Woollcott's enthusiasms could make a book a best seller more surely than anything else."

It is a demonstrable fact that in the publishing world the Woollcott favour was more prized than the good word of any other critic.

One phase of radio showmanship, since abandoned, stirred him to



exasperation. This was the semi-public production to which an audience is invited on the tacit understanding that when a stage attendant holds up a placard inscribed "Applause" or "Laughter," the guests shall burst forth into spontaneous acclaim. After attending one of these functions (where he sat in glum and forbidding silence, refusing to "bleat with the sheep"), he matured his plan. Assisted by three stout-throated associates, he would attend one of these gala performances and when the "Applause" sign was presented, all four would rise up and shout in vociferous unison:

"Lousy!"

Failing to find anyone with sufficient hardihood to support him, he abandoned the plan, though with reluctance. He claimed that it paralleled, in the department of criticism, Gelett Burgess's patent for a private chaos: throwing a raw egg into an electric fan.

Time could hardly have hung heavy upon Woolcott's hands; nevertheless, he now branched out into another professional activity. It will be remembered that on the strength of the war playlet produced for the sick and bored at Savenay, Arthur Hopkins had commissioned Woolcott to write a play for Broadway production, and Woolcott had threatened to take him up with *World Without End*, then a mental embryo. Apparently it never got beyond that stage. With a new dramatic idea fermenting, he sent word to the producer that he might expect fulfilment of a long-overdue promise.

One of Woolcott's fetishes was the harlot in literature. He felt that Guy de Maupassant's study of the heroic and pathetic type of drab in the immortal *Boule de Suif* was susceptible of telling dramatic presentation, and persuaded his former assistant, George S. Kaufman, now an established playwright, to the same optimistic view. Together, they wrote *The Channel Road*, and Arthur Hopkins produced it. While they were mulling over it, Woolcott improved the occasion by composing a *New Yorker* sketch, "The Deep, Tangled Kaufman," the title being a take-off on the Kaufman-Marc Connelly play, *The Deep, Tangled Wildwood*, which had a brief and uneventful run. In the Profile Woolcott depicted his collaborator as

... a man who seldom writes a play without a collaborator, who, rather than let a fresh vegetable soil his lips, subsists on a severe diet of meat, bread, and chocolate peppermints; who, in the laboratory work any dramatist must do, limits his studies of human nature and the American scene as far as possible to the moments when he is dummy at the New York Bridge Club; who while

walking hatless and alone a-down our avenues, talks continuously to himself in what appears to terrified passers-by as a low confidential snarl, and who during the seven or eight years in which he has been one of the most competent, fertile, and successfully productive of American playwrights, has hung on with puzzling tenacity to the same newspaper job with which he was, by a narrow margin, keeping body and soul apart when his first play was accepted for production.

*The Channel Road* was not a success either by critical estimate or in public approval. Joseph Wood Krutch, in *The American Drama Since 1918*, judges that its "nostalgic sentimentality . . . is such pure Alexander Woollcott that Mr. Kaufman can have contributed nothing except his technical skill." It was withdrawn after fifty performances.

Undeterred by the semi-fiasco—it was no worse than that—the dramatic partners tried again five years later. *The Dark Tower*, a gloomy and somewhat obscure mystery play, was no improvement on the earlier attempt. Brooks Atkinson, in *The Times*, found in it "Mr. Woollcott's rubicund passion for murder and mystery"—and deemed it a loosely woven drama which would have been better told in *The New Yorker*.

Putting a good face upon it, Playwright Woollcott stoutly maintained that while *The Dark Tower* might be inferior to *Macbeth* in some respects, nevertheless "it was a tremendous success except for the minor detail that people wouldn't come to see it. Yet it really was a kind of success at that. I mean that we enjoyed it enormously and it seemed to be attended with great relish by all of the people (without exception) whose good opinion I would respect and therefore want. Then, thanks to the movie rights, it brought me in rather more money than I am used to getting for the same amount of work."

Though game enough to joke about it, Woollcott was hurt in his pride of authorship. This is proved by the omission from his biographical sketch in *Who's Who in America* of both plays, his only public activity not chronicled there. He wrote petulantly to Burns Mantle, the current historian of stage productions, and author of *Contemporary Playwrights*:

What's all this nonsense of classifying as a playwright one who (on the most liberal of interpretations) is no more than five-sixths of a playwright? I did write half of one play (with G.S.K.) and (with G.S.K. and G. de M.) a third of another. When I recall their fate it irks me to be called upon for enough clairvoyance to tell what I think about my first success.

With the passing of *The Dark Tower*, Woolcott dropped play-writing. Thenceforth his dramatic activities took another form.

Somewhere in the course of the collaboration, he conceived one of his chaste passions for his collaborator's wife. It belongs in the category of anomalous attachments peculiar to his type. So wholly frank and above board was it that it became a household cliché, a subject of standard banter among the three friends. Over their drinks they would solemnly argue the best solution to the triangular problem; whether Aleck should bribe George to vanish from the marital scene, or whether George ought not to contribute to Aleck's support if he took over the ménage, or wouldn't a dose of arsenic, tactfully administered, prove the most economical and effective method?

Yet some of Aleck's friends believe that, back of all the fun, there was on his side a genuine, if covert, romantic sentiment; that Bea Kaufman's cleverness, her good looks, her independence of mind, and her social adroitness appealed to more than impersonal feelings and that, had she been free, his attentions might well have taken a serious turn. On her part there was never anything more than friendly affection; not always that, as they had some lively spats. Several years of his mildly fitful devotion ended as it had begun, in a permanent tripartite alliance of camaraderie.

## 16

### THE GILA MONSTER

IN the opinion of Max Beerbohm, who has been one, the most miserable of human beings is an ex-dramatic critic. Mr. Beerbohm's friend and fellow, Mr. Woolcott, never actually attained to the ex. He quit the routine but never the practice. Stage doings and stage beings were always the blood of his veins, the ink of his pen. The same year that saw his determination to save his mind from rot by quitting the dangerous trade dated his theatrical volume, *Going to Pieces*.

Financial risks never really influenced him. He turned his back on Herbert Swope's \$16,000-a-year-plus, without a quiver. Partly this was self-confidence, partly an adventurous intrepidity of soul, and partly a

grotesque misconception of himself. At the height of an earning capacity which, later, would dwarf a railroad president's salary, he was accustomed to say (and believe!):

"If obliged to, I could get along perfectly well on twenty-five hundred a year, and live practically as I do now."

As he promulgated this theory, he might be discussing a four-dollar steak, flanked by the costliest out-of-season vegetables, and a bottle of six-dollar vintage Burgundy.

His creed of frugality was not put to the test. Concern as to his capacity to make a living did, at rare times, beset him briefly, but without reason. Contracts and assignments were at once showered upon him by magazines. Lecture opportunities offered. Hollywood made passes. There was certainly no month when Alexander Woolcott could not meet the rent on the first and have enough left over to buy a meal at his favourite restaurant, Voisin's. Notwithstanding, he was not content. He complained to Alex Osborn that he was "a chronic winner of second prizes."

His second book of 1928, *Two Gentlemen and a Lady*, could hardly be reckoned better than a fourth or fifth prize, since, like its predecessors, it enjoyed a meagre sale. Not being dependent upon book royalties, he gave up his Hotel des Artistes apartment, having got wind of something more palatial. First, he turned suburbanite and took the lodge house on the Emil J. Stehli estate at Locust Valley, Long Island, which, by the observation of curious neighbours, he kept in a permanent state of illumination. Guests came and went on week-end tides of hospitality which diminished to a trickle but never left the host quite stranded on the desert isle of solitude. Here he fell in love with the daughter of the house. That she was happily married made no special difference. His affections were elastic enough to include the husband. Throughout his life, there continued a devoted friendship between him and the Paul Hyde Bonners, which was extended to the Bonner children as they grew up.

Annual vacations in Europe had become a habit of the dramatic critic which he did not care to break, though he no longer enjoyed the functional privilege of the expense account and must travel at his own cost. With Alice Duer Miller, Harpo Marx, and Beatrice Kaufman, he took a villa at Antibes, staffed by a dignified butler, a slightly insane cook, and a retinue of casual servants. "A stream of incredible people," so Aleck deemed them, came to the elaborate luncheons, though from

the list which he appends to the statement it would be a touchy business to select those to whom the adjective is applicable. The roster includes George Bernard Shaw, Peggy Hopkins Joyce, Elsa Maxwell, Otis and Cornelia Skinner, Mary Garden, Grace Moore, Somerset Maugham, Irene Castle, Lady Mendl, Daisy Fellowes, Ruth Gordon, and Frank Harris.

Aleck conceived an immediate and permanent distaste for Elsa Maxwell, based upon what was probably a misconception. His idea was that, seeing him basking in idleness and without visible means of support, she assumed him to be some sort of unclassified but expert parasite upon the idle rich who frequented the locality. Some casual remark of hers he wrathfully interpreted as an offer to rescue him from this amateurish métier and associate him with herself in one or another of her gossamer and lucrative social enterprises. Thereafter he could hardly mention her name without a string of adjectives which, having respect for the proprieties and the laws of libel, I refrain from repeating.

On his return to America he bought an apartment in the Campanile, a co-operative building at 450 East Fifty-second Street, where lived Alice Duer Miller and Ralph Pulitzer. It was one more step upward in luxury. Various names were suggested for the new habitat, at the solicitation of the owner: one from F.P.A., who offered the Ojibway term, Ocowoica, together with the translation, "Little-Three-Room-Apartment-on-the-East-River-That-It-Is-Difficult-to-Find-a-Taxicab-Near." Dorothy Parker's nomination was adopted: Wit's End. If the stream of people at Antibes was incredible, what term could be applied to Wit's End? Thither came, in the next five years, the widening whirl in which Alexander Woolcott had the knack of making himself a focus. Stars of the stage and the literary world were the familiars of the place: more than once royalty breakfasted there. To that dour, silent Scot, Walker McMartin, friend of Aleck's undergraduate days, is accredited the snappish aside, after his host had introduced him to a list of headliners, "Why don't you keep your *Who's Who* locked in the bookcase?"

Literary markets were waiting for him. His accumulated mail was heavy with profitable offers. Out of all the opportunities he chose the connection which was the least rewarding in dollars and cents but the most in satisfaction and prestige. His tie-up with *The New Yorker* proves that the Woolcott acumen went far beyond mere dollar-shrewdness.

In the glorious days of war, having put *Stars and Stripes* to bed, the office "soviet" would repair to some contiguous bistro and there, dining *sur le zinc* or *à la microbe* (the contemporary boulevard slang for open-air eating), discuss what kind of magazine they would run when the show was over and they got back home. Upon one point all agreed: Harold Ross was the man to edit it. Such a magazine was started, *The Home Sector*, with Ross as editor-in-chief. He took on Winterich, Hawley, Baldridge, and Wallgren, with Woollcott as contributing editor, an activity which did not clash with his *Times* commitments. The theory of the magazine was that the United States would continue to be interested in its soldiery after the war was over. The theory was wrong; the United States, cynically bored with the whole business, wanted only to forget and turn back to normalcy. It availed nothing that the magazine was an expert production or that Ross planned its conversion to peacetime standards. After six months, *The Home Sector* folded, the end being hastened by a pressroom strike.

Ross went to the *American Legion Weekly* and thence to *Judge*, where he was dissatisfied. Woollcott, who had put considerable energy of writing into *The Home Sector*, was so disgruntled that he refused to help Ross with his projected *New Yorker* by presenting him to possible sources of finance. He could see no future for the proposed publication. Later he revised his opinion.

Ross was doggedly intent upon his purpose. He thought that he was a better editor than he had been able to prove himself on either of the weeklies. The only kind of magazine on which he could work with entire satisfaction would be one of his own making and control. He had a little money; his wife had a little money; his friend Hawley Truax had more than a little; and his acquaintance Raoul Fleischmann, of the baking family, had a great deal plus a hankering for the publishing business. These four, with Lloyd Paul Stryker, whom Truax had interested in the venture, financed *The New Yorker* through its birth pangs.

At the date of its birth, 1925, Harold W. Ross was thirty-three years old. He was a lank, lantern-jawed, bristly-haired man who suggested one of A. B. Frost's better drawings in the rustic genre. Aleck likened him to "a dishonest Abraham Lincoln." With no more than an incomplete high-school course in Salt Lake City as preparation, he had become a reporter on one of the local papers, wandered about for a time,

journeyman-wise, and had gone to the war with a railroad unit before joining *Stars and Stripes*. He had the Westerner's distrustful dislike for New York and would never have settled there but for his determination to marry Jane Grant and her determination to live nowhere else. It is even doubtful whether the general plan of *The New Yorker* was particularly to his taste; he used to say in his more acute accesses of editorial dissatisfaction that he had three or four better ideas before he ever thought up *The New Yorker* and he wished to Christ he'd followed any one of them.

The magazine started on a financial schedule of economy, not to say parsimony, as I can personally testify, having received in payment for a pseudonymous article in the second issue a cheque for ten dollars. The idea was, I believe, that one acquired kudos, if not wealth, by association with such talent as Alice Duer Miller, Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woolcott, Rea Irvin, Marc Connelly, and George S. Kaufman, all of whose names appeared as Advisory Editors. The list was mainly for purposes of window dressing. Ross now looks back upon it with pangs of conscience, as "one of the dirtiest things I ever did." It was a concession to Raoul Fleischmann's belief, generally held at the time, that "big" names were essential to a successful start. As Ross's budget would not stretch to headliners' rates, he secured the names, gratis, for his masthead. To his gratification and surprise, he actually got real help from the volunteers; even such habitually non-advisory persons as Dorothy Parker and George S. Kaufman.

As an editor, Harold Ross was an impassioned individualist. His imprint, made with a blue pencil, was upon everything that got into the "book" and thousands of other things that got into the scrap-basket. Make-up, type, captions, covers, illustrations, articles, reprints, even poetry, of which he knew nothing and admitted it, went through the chemical reactions of his mind. His salient characteristic was a passion for facts. The slightest doubt on any point, however unimportant, roused him to marginal inquiry, often profane. He always numbered these comments and expected of his writers satisfactory replies corresponding to the numerals. On one three-part series, his final notation was numbered 147. This was approximately a question to every three sentences.

Under such a barrage-producing dynamo, the staff changed swiftly, and usually for the better. Of the early product, Dale Kramer and George R. Clark, writing in *Harper's*, said:

In one way or another everyone connected with it was slightly mad. . . . For years *The New Yorker* office had a touch of the loony bin about it.

It was a successful form of lunacy. The sophisticated and sardonic angle, "not for the old lady in Dubuque," the effect of "exuberant disenchantment" (Messrs. Kramer and Clark again), its almost blatant independence and contempt of sacred cows, whether advertisers or men in high position or religiously accepted ideas and ideals, won a quick *succès d'estime*, though it took three years to cross the thin red line dividing loss from profit. Established writers liked to appear in *The New Yorker*.

For two years Aleck watched the progress of the magazine without supporting it other than by random contributions. Part of this time he was on *The World*; later he became a sort of general, though semi-detached, editorial adviser to *Vanity Fair*, with special reference to the dramatic department. In 1929 he joined *The New Yorker* staff as a regular weekly contributor with "Shouts and Murmurs" (he had taken over the title from his quickly obsolete book), to which were added contributions to another stock department, the Profiles. For the regular feature he was paid at the outset \$200, then \$250, and finally \$400. His Profiles, sometimes under a *nom de plume*, commanded approximately the same rate. When, a few years later, he was receiving five times as much for articles of equal length, he never made any complaint on the financial side. He preferred *The New Yorker* to any other medium and, even after diplomatic relations were broken off, still wistfully hoped that some day he might again disport himself in its pages.

His Profiles were mostly saccharine in flavour. He used this department as a portrait gallery of his friends, Ruth Draper, Noel Coward, Lloyd Stryker, George Kaufman, the Lunts, Harpo Marx, Frank Lloyd Wright, Marc Connelly, Katharine Cornell, and others. In rereading "Shouts and Murmurs" one is struck with the extreme exiguity of the items, their reminiscent and repetitious quality; yet so buoyantly are they executed, with such deft turn of phrase and such happy illumination of reference, that the reader is seduced and captured by their sheer virtuosity. Ross once declared that no other living writer had so completely capitalized on so thin a vein of ore as Alexander Woollcott.

Aleck put the same idea in another way, referring to himself as a great writer with nothing to say. Others, he would modestly admit (and mean it), could do a given article better than he could; a hundred



others. Ross credits him with taking an eminently sane view of his swift success in the magazine field. It took him a long time to absorb the fact that he really was a rarity in that department.

"Then he came to the conclusion," says Ross, "that a man who could write literately and fairly well and, above all, turn in clean copy—which Aleck did—and get it on time was very rare. That is true."

He took special pride in his mechanical ability to "tailor" his page features to within a line or two of the exact length required, and would reject hotly any suggestion that he give himself a little more leeway and allow someone else to do the editing down.

His campaign against the itty-bitsy school of advertisements was in the nature of a public service. Nowhere was he more spirited and effective than in deploring "the tendency of our merchants to simper and grow cute in their relations with the passing public." Road signs in particular stirred his bile. He instituted a "Well-I'll-Be-Damned!" file to which were admitted such enormities as Rowly Bowly Alleys, Helpy Selfy Stores, Yum Yum Eat Shoppe, Tasty Tiggs, Goody Nook, Bekkus Puddy and all the winsome sisterhood of Woofies and Tookies and Ticklies.

"It is more than I can bear!" protested Mr. Woolcott in agonized resentment.

Incredible are the inconsistencies of human taste! He who so scathingly derided the ickie-wickies and oopsie-doopsies of the billboards, revelled in sweet diminutives as applied to his not-so-diminutive self. To one correspondent he was "Dear Mush," to another "Dear Roughie," to still others "Snowflake," "Blossom Boy," "Winsome," and "Wack," many of these writers being ladies who had attained years of discretion. And it may be doubted whether the cutest little billboard blurb artist of them all ever devised a term more provocative of emesis than the pet appellation whereby the stern critic was addressed by one of his fond correspondents; to wit, "Dear Acky Aweeza." That never got into the "Well-I'll-be-Damned!" file. So pleased was the recipient with it, however, that he adopted a shortened form as his transatlantic cable code name when he went to Russia.

A valued editorial coadjutor rather than a loved one was Woolcott. Foreseeing difficulties which, as he shrewdly guessed, would be enhanced rather than mollified by the element of personal and vacillating friendship, Ross elected to handle him by remote control. He appointed to the thankless job of buffer Katharine S. White, one of the associate

editors, with Wolcott Gibbs as aide. It is regarded in the office as an all but incredible testimonial to diplomacy, firmness, and God-like patience that for nearly ten years Mrs. White was able to handle the "Gila monster" (one of Ross's less exasperated characterizations of him) without open rupture. What is more, he accorded to her a professional deference which he exhibited towards nobody else on earth, with the exception of Carr Van Anda. To the end she was "My dear Mrs. White."

Outwardly amiable, the editorial relations between Wolcott Gibbs and the magazine's prickliest contributor became at times painful to one of the parties, at least. Gibbs handled much of the Woolcott departmental copy and observed, after it was all over, that he bore honourable scars from the experience. How far his sufferings influenced him when he came to write the Woolcott Profile which caused the violent disruption of all ties, Gibbs, himself, would probably be unable to say.

At first, Woolcott was amenable to minor suggestions and would reply agreeably and affirmatively to a "may-we-change-this?" query. Hardly a year passed before he began to resign, a practice which he continued at frequent intervals. It became an office cliché to inquire, when a telephone buzzed with special virulence, "Woolcott resigning again?"

Ross sent an editorial memo to Raoul Fleischmann, publisher of the magazine:

That was, of course, Woolcott's one-hundredth resignation. He always resigns under such circumstances. . . .

On the rare occasions when Editor Ross made a direct appeal, his star contributor was still recalcitrant. He replied to one mildly couched suggestion that, in conformity with an office rule, he should delete an objectionable line to save the editorial face, by wiring:

SORRY I CANNOT SAVE YOUR FACE IF ONLY FOR SOME MUSEUM.

A. WOOLCOTT.

It was mainly the old trouble which had kept *The Times* copy-desk on the alert and exasperated Swope-o'-*The-World*: the urchin was rampant again in Woolcott. Vainly did the editorial department protest that final judgment in matters of taste was, by agreement both oral and written, to be the office prerogative. The writer disclaimed

any interest in taste. Ross, looking back at those years of combat, writes:

There was usually a jangle every week because he'd want to put in some off-colour thing, a dirty word, or a for-men-only story. . . . We had to fight to keep him printable.

Mrs. White, who can hardly be charged with prudishness (indeed, a prude would live a harassed life in *The New Yorker* office), would wire, "Fear tuba anecdote too graphic," whereupon Woolcott in a huff would reply, ordering the whole piece dropped, with the comment, "Everyone here thinks you are unduly squeamish." And again, "I want to take this up with the proper person and I've always considered you the properest person I know."

"What can you expect, sir," she wrote, "if you send in a piece that is really very dirty?"

It may be well to state here that, though by no means puritanical of speech, Woolcott was neither foul-mouthed nor foul-minded; less so, I should say, than the generality of men of his class. He certainly did not eschew the familiar "four-letter words," but neither did he drag them in. He used them as he might employ a Latin saw or a French phrase, where no other formula would so well fit his meaning. Never have I heard him tell an off-colour story which depended primarily upon smut for its point. In his mind vulgarity was not the soul of wit, though it might be the vestment wherein it was clothed. He kept his more painful pranks for the place where they would produce the most effect, the printed page.

Once he sent in a double resignation, by wire supported by a long-distance telephone call, only to hustle a letter off to Mrs. White taking it all back.

Occasions of contention other than smut arose, major and minor, unbelievably minor, some of them. He resigned, or threatened to resign, because a request of his for reimbursement of postage was not at once fulfilled; because a routine cheque for one dollar, then the standard pay for a tip, was sent him—was it a deliberate insult, he demanded; because an insignificant cut was requested; but these all-is-over-between-us epistles were invariably followed by retractions and, on rare occasions, the exhibition of a disarming humility, as in this apology to the long-suffering Mrs. White:

I am an incurable old fool to get into a choleric fury about changes unrelated



MOSCOW



to the eternal verities. I beg of you to bear with me. . . . I am returning the copy herewith, striking out the objectionable impurities.

Between Ross, with his sleuth-hound nose for facts, and Woolcott, with his airy insensibility to such minor considerations, friction was bound to arise. One page article brought eighteen factual queries from the editor, many of which the author could not satisfy without further research, which he was loath to incur. There was recurrent complaint of lack of body which the writer had striven to cover by virtuosity of treatment. "W. cuts easy," noted Wolcott Gibbs, after operating on one of the pieces with a blue pencil. The salient defect of the Woolcott matter reached their zenith in an article on Jack Humphrey and the Seeing Bye, a charity dear to Woolcott's heart. Deputed to edit the copy, St. Clair McKelway of the staff reported that it could not be brought up to standard by any means within his command. Mrs. White concurred:

. . . This is ghastly. We can't use it. Full of clichés, gags, sob stories, little hints to contribute to the cause, and in the end tells you absolutely *nothing* about the man. It means the end of the Shouts and Murmurs dept. if we reject, but Woolcott in the piece talks about signs from heaven. Maybe this is one to show us the radio has ruined him and that he'll not write anything good again.

The office staff got to work upon the article (and upon the author) and whipped the piece into readable shape without bloodshed. But Harold Ross was becoming impatient of his star's prima-donna airs, which reached the pitch of demanding the impracticable, as when he wished to lead the magazine, though he did admit a willingness to settle for the last page, facing the inner cover, a position equally impossible since it was covered by a two-year advertising contract. There was a period when he thought that he would like to be editor himself.

He was growing negligent. At the last moment he would wire "no page this week." Again, he would turn in something closely paralleling his work in other magazines. One week *The New Yorker* and *McCall's Magazine* (a monthly) appeared on the news-stands carrying Woolcott articles which, except for slight structural differences, were identical. Called to account for this, the errant author blandly explained that he was making a scientific experiment to determine the extent of duplication in readership!

Reluctantly Harold Ross reached the conclusion that his Gila monster was too expensive a luxury in wear and tear on the editorial patience:

That was just at the time he was getting drunk with power. . . . I figured he was too big for us: was becoming a big, national personality and the magazine couldn't hold him. At about that time he announced that he wanted to quit the page temporarily. I said O.K. without argument. . . . All the time Aleck wrote for us he was a trial—something of a nuisance and an embarrassment. . . . He made such a holy hell of a row weekly about his copy that we were all tired of it. I remember a reflection of those days, a personal one, that there must be easier ways of making a living than going through his weekly flouncing around.

It was no specific quarrel that drew Woollcott away eventually (several years after Ross was reconciled to giving him up), but the engrossing demands of the radio. Until the final, irremediable rupture over the *New Yorker* Profile of himself, Woollcott maintained always the nostalgic hope of returning to its pages. He wrote, making his peace after some outbreak, to Mrs. White:

My agreement with *The New Yorker* was complete and satisfactory in all respects, and the only blank to be filled in was the date of resumption. I should think that Ross might now feel disposed to give me up as hopeless. I certainly should think it natural if he also regarded me as both venal<sup>1</sup> and intolerably diluted, or at least spread so thin as to be imperceptible to sight or taste. . . . I like to think of *The New Yorker* as the place I am going back to when this period of storm is over. As this notion of mine does not bind you or *The New Yorker* in any way, I don't suppose you will object to my harbouring it.

## 17

### SPOTLIGHT

"You know, I was born in Macy's show window"  
—Woollcott to Mrs. Edward W. Root

THE setting is the lobby of the Hotel Plaza. It is early afternoon; the hush of austere elegance informs the scene. A super-plump guest in a loudish cape and an oversize Homburg hat stands at the desk, collecting his extensive mail. Emerging from the elevator, a correctly clad gentle-

<sup>1</sup> The reference is to the commercialization of the Woollcott name in paid and specious testimonials, to which Ross had objected.

man with every appearance of membership in one of the English-speaking races catches sight of the obese figure at the desk, who simultaneously sights and thus accosts him:

Mahe!  
Mahi!  
Mahol

Stiffening to attention beneath the scrutiny of the interested on-lookers, the other responds smoothly:

Mah-rumstick-a-bunnickel,  
Witcat, ninnycat,  
Soapfat meringue!

People begin to edge away. Others, emboldened or fascinated by curiosity, move forward. The gentlemen chant in rapt antiphony:

Hobble-gobble, ricker-racker,  
Hobble-gobble, firecracker,  
Hobble-gobble, razoo,  
Johnny, blow your bazoo,  
Siss, boom, ah! *CENTRAL!*

The leader of the duet is Alexander Woollcott, in the oft-repeated sketch, "Alexander Woollcott Presents Alexander Woollcott." His obliging stooge is his fellow alumnus of the Philadelphia Central High School, Ed (Leopold) Wynn.<sup>1</sup> Just a couple of old grads, reverting momentarily to type.

The door of the drawing-room is thrown open with a flourish. Heads turn. Cocktails are lowered. Conversation lapses. There stands Alexander Woollcott, beamingly conscious of the attention he has attracted; beside him a pretty, teen-aged girl, less happy in the public gaze.

"This," says he, "is a young kinswoman of mine. We are raising her to be a harlot."<sup>2</sup>

An office-building elevator stops to take on Alexander Woollcott. The half-dozen passengers already aboard are edified at seeing him approach an elderly gentleman at the rear of the car and fall upon his

<sup>1</sup> Woollcott so thoroughly approved the dual performance that he embodied it later in *Long, Long Ago*.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Woollcott in her book on the Woollcott family, *None but a Mule*, identifies the victim as her younger sister, Polly, and gives a slightly different, though no more tasteful, version.



knees in the attitude of adoration. It is his way of paying tribute to one whom he addresses as *maître*, a manifestation which embarrasses more than it flatters the British novelist, W. Somerset Maugham, who lacks the Woollcott taste for personal publicity.

It is what was known in the exhibitionist days of authorship as a Trained Seal tour. A group of docile writers is travelling from city to city, making little speeches in bookshops and autographing their works for worshipful females. (One of the few stand-outs was Christopher Morley, who curtly replied to such an invitation, "The book is for sale; not the author.") Alexander Woollcott makes himself the sensation, if not precisely the hit, of the circuit by beginning his set speech:

"I arrived here this morning with barber's itch, fallen arches, and change of life."

Commencement at Hamilton College. The President's Reception, a dignified function, strongly scented with tea, is crowded with alumni, their wives, children, and friends. Woollcott '09 is conspicuous in the procession moving decorously forward to shake hands. Nearby stands a pretty woman, with her husband who was in Aleck's time in college. Aleck breaks from the line, prances over, folds the astonished wife in a fond embrace, gives her a resounding kiss, and announces in a voice that dominates the chatter:

"There, my sweet, is your sex-life for the year!"

Another scene, this time suburban; the large dining-room of George T. Bye, Aleck's literary agent, wherein are assembled a score of New Canaan's representative and conservative citizenry at a formal breakfast, to meet the visiting celebrity. After a long wait, doubtless carefully calculated by the show figure, he appears upon the scene sumptuously if informally clad in a regal dressing-gown with a golden dragon, rampant, embroidered upon it. Spreading his arms, butterfly fashion, he confides to the guests in the mellifluous accents of self-congratulation, "I have just had the most magnificent bowel movement."

Inspiration of the moment? On the contrary, a sedulously pursued policy, all of these. Within a few hours the world which he frequents will be buzzing with "Woollcott's latest"; his name will be upon everybody's lips, which is the sole object of the "stunt." He is engaged

in the facture of a product for public consumption, the simulacrum of Alexander Woollcott, the presentment of a fabulous personage whom all America will one day pay money to see and hear. Seldom has anyone worked to an end with more industry and less scruple for the sensibilities of others.

One of his secretaries thinks that he never quite grew up; that, in his case, the child was not the father to the man, but his twin brother. Aleck believed his showmanship to be an innate quality, of which he was rather proud, though when called to account for some offensive manifestation he would ascribe it to a peculiar insensitivity, and not to exhibitionism.

He violated the stern Presbyterian tradition of Hamilton, while addressing the student body in the chapel (elsewhere on the campus it would not have mattered), by embodying a decidedly off-colour story in his lecture. Afterwards he half-apologized to Thomas F. Nichols, who had been one of his old instructors.

"People who ask me to speak do so at their own risk. I never know what I'm going to say, and too often it's the wrong thing."

The Broadway fellowship accepted such eccentricities with the tolerance of amusement or indifference. To his older friends it was a matter of concern. Alice Root Nichols, his Egeria of college days, East on her annual vacation from her home in Arizona, took him sharply to task for some of the more flagrant outbreaks which had been reported to her.

"I think it's deplorable," she declared.

Aleck, who had listened with deference, offered his defence. "You don't know New York."

"Decency and good manners are the same in New York as anywhere else, I suppose. You ought to be above such cheap trickeries."

He said, "Mrs. Nichols, if you're going to do any good in New York, you've got to be noticed. You don't know the game here."

"You tried the same method in college," she pointed out. "Was it so successful?"

He got up and paced the floor, setting forth his credo. "You don't know the game," he repeated. "Look at So-and-so and So-and-so and So-and-so. They're as good as I am, or better. Who ever hears of them? What paper ever mentions their names? They've soft-pedalled themselves into obscurity. That sort of thing isn't going to happen to me."

He adopted the easy sensationalism of shock, as in the instances

cited above. There were few stories too "rough" for him, no matter what the company. He electrified a dinner table by telling his companion, who had differed with him on a point of politics, that she had the mentality of a four months' foetus, and outraged another gathering in the course of a debate by informing a fair opponent that her skull was full of popcorn soaked in urine. No party was immune from the Woollcott adventures in dubious publicity, with the result that he received many invitations from hostesses of the what-do-you-suppose-Woollcott-said-at-our-house-last-night genus.

With the same purpose rather than from any ill-will, he would devise glittering insults for guests in his own place, addressing them as "You faun's rear end; I hoped we'd seen the last of you," or "Here's our withered harpy back again." It was not natural bad manners but calculated publicity which inspired him to greet a highly social dowager as "Mrs. Emptyhead" and a visiting notoriety as "Lady Brainless."

He would go late to a party, stand in the doorway, waiting for a lull, and, when it came, say loudly and affably: "I see all the riffraff of New York is here to-night."

Sometimes he asserted that these *tours de force* "just chanced to pop into my mind," which would have been more credible to his friends had not the occasion of his most sensational adventures in the unsavoury been so carefully chosen. Furthermore, he loved to be represented as a social *enfant terrible*. He told Charles Brackett, the novelist, who was a friend of his, that he wanted to be in the next book, then in process of writing. Warned that "the buttons will be off the foils," Aleck only grinned. The story, *American Colony*, depicted him in unmistakable outline as a grossly obese dramatic critic whose style "is a mixture of black bile and treacle." In one scene this Leviathan, attempting to pass to his theatre seat in front of a female acquaintance, loudly adjures her to "Suck up your guts." Aleck was delighted. It was exactly the sort of thing that he would say if he had thought of it first. In fact, theatre managements were perturbed lest he should actually adopt and apply the formula.

He assured a Canadian interviewer, "I love to be libelled," and was taken at his word with a detailed description of "the moonpuss, Woollcott . . . his jowls would shame a bulldog with the mumps . . . his head is as wide as a broodmare's rump." The celebrity wrote a note of congratulation to the reporter.

\* In the measured estimates of autobiography, he followed the same

system. He offered to supply full notes on himself to an editor, assuring him that they would probably be "nastier than any of the other articles published about me." While a *New Yorker* Profile of him was in preparation, he was lavish with suggestions, none of which was complimentary to the subject. No less sympathetic portrait has ever been presented on the stage than *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. It is, of course, notorious that Woolcott, thus caricatured (though he would deny on occasion that he was the subject), could not rest until he got his chance to star in the comedy.

From that department of physical routine which is supposed to be essentially private, Aleck extracted a reflex publicity. He had his superb Campanile bathroom decorated with a portrait tile, exhibiting the proprietor at his toilet. This does not mean combing his hair. Few works of contemporary ceramic art were more talked of in non-artistic circles.

If there was any limelight glowing, it was intolerable to Aleck not to share it. He was at supper one night at the Savoy Grill, one of London's smart after-theatre spots, with two fellow alumni of Hamilton, Wallace Johnson and John V. A. Weaver, and the wife of the latter, Peggy Wood, then starring in a seasonal success. A few tables away sat Edna Ferber with some friends. The room was filling up with prominent people, several of whom came over to greet the star of the theatrical moment. Others were gathered about the adjacent authoress. Nobody was paying any heed to Alexander Woolcott.

This went on until the victim of public neglect could stand it no longer. Catching up a large serviette, he flung it across his shoulder in the style of a matador's cape. With his other hand, he appropriated a carving knife. Thus equipped, he burst into the circle surrounding the other table, capered before the distressed Miss Ferber, and vociferated, "You shall not enter Mexico, *señorita*."

Few besides the Americans present knew that some of her writings had offended the Mexican government and there had been talk of barring her from that country. To the tolerant British, observing in well-bred surprise, it would be just another instance of the unaccountable American humour. Nevertheless, Aleck had made his effect, such as it was. He ambled back to his own place, content and smiling, which is more than could be said of his compatriots thus helplessly involved in the fustian drama.

As soon as he could afford to patronize expensive outfitters, he began to embellish the scene in a dazzling afternoon investiture of cutaway

coat, trousers of the latest cut, spats, top hat, and tender-hued waistcoat. His small and shapely feet, of which he was excusably vain, were encased in custom-made shoes costing him forty-five dollars a pair. Yet, the better to be noticed, he would attend a first night in huge galoshes, and pass, flip-flopping down the aisle, with the maximum of frou-frou.

As companion piece to his sartorial artistry, he sported for a brief period a silky goatee which, in the opinion of F.P.A., "detracts from his beauty, if I may coin a phrase." Contemporaneously Marc Connelly darkly suspected him of cultivating an Oxford accent. If this is true, it was of short duration. The Woolcott manner of speech was too definitely *sui generis* to profit by exotic ornamentation.

Dress up as he might, he still lacked something. The genius for it was not in him. There were a hundred denizens of Broadway, actors and men about town, who could outstrip him in taste and sartorial distinction. This would not do. He must be first. He abandoned that special field and exchanged the elegant for the eccentric. Extravagant cuts in outré colours were now his chosen display. His neckties were selected on a basis of publicity value rather than private taste. His hats, preferably of some unusual shade of green, were larger and floppier of brim than the normal. Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt II presented him with a red waistcoat into which she had worked in delicate and laborious needlepoint striking designs of decapitated torsos, amputated heads, and other distressing forms, addressed to his notorious penchant for the macabre. It was intended for home wear.

She should have known him better. That flagrant garment became a beacon light of theatre and hotel lobbies, of Broadway and Fifth Avenue sidewalks, and its proud wearer caught a severe cold on the chest because he could not bear to shut it away from public view even in the harshest weather.

Aleck's satisfaction attained its zenith in an adaptation of his own. On one of his Oriental trips he had bought a garment admirably suited to his steadily increasing corpulence. Not even an Alexander Woolcott can wear a flaming, flowing kimono on American thoroughfares. The pattern was perfect; how to adjust it to his wider needs? He took it to his tailor. Could it not be used as a model for an all-weather topcoat, in some sound fabric of a dark, rich green? Knowing his customer, the tailor did not attempt to argue. Upon the Jap model he constructed such a garment as the trade, in its most licentious

moments, had never dreamed of. The body flared voluminously, front and back, but it was the grotesquely billowing sleeves that most pleased Aleck. That was a moment of profound satisfaction when, wrapped in it for the first time, he strolled along the Great White Way, caught the astonished glances and heard the murmured or explosive comments of the wayfarers.

He was comfortable, dry, warm, at ease, and the most conspicuous figure in the theatrical district, a distinction cheaply bought for the \$185 he paid the tailor.

While on a transatlantic trip he made effective use of contrast. For several days he lolled on deck in the sloppiest of *négligés*, playing the role of genius too sufficient unto itself to heed the effete rules of social custom. Having thus built up a figure of Bohemian nonchalance, he produced his *contrachimax*. On the last evening but one of the voyage he appeared late for dinner, in the fullest fig; tailcoat, white tie, white waistcoat, white spats, white coat-flower, and the prettiest woman aboard on his arm. To his undisguised delight, the whole salon burst into spontaneous applause.

In the foregoing, Alexander Woollcott is shown at his cheapest and shoddiest. It may be argued that the episodes do not mirror his true character, that the extravagances are superficial. But habit becomes the man. The artifact Woollcott, which he constructed for the camera of the general eye, may well, as Van Anda regretfully surmised, have so influenced the real Woollcott beneath as to mar permanently his performance in life. Certainly it stimulated his rabid greed for publicity at any price.

What rage for fame attends both great and small!  
Better be damned than mentioned not at all.

So wrote Peter Pindar, 1738-1819. Peter Pindar's real name was John Wolcot. If there is anything in heredity, he should have been and perhaps was Alexander Woollcott's great-great-grandfather.

## THE THWARTED ACTOR

It would have been idle to expostulate with him that he could and did reach a far wider audience than any actor might aspire to. It would have been idle to point out how . . . readers of his, great folk and mean folk . . . were laughing and weeping at the promptings of his written word. He knew that well enough. He *knew* it. But he did not *feel* it. He did not hear them laugh, did not see them cry.

THIS was written not about but by Alexander Woollcott. He was diagnosing the eccentricity of another gifted and stagestruck amateur, Charles Dickens,<sup>1</sup> and, in so doing, indicating his own. For at the age of forty-four he yielded to the glamour of his unforgotten successes as Puck in Kansas City, Cholly Boutonnière in Germantown, his various feminine roles with the Hamilton College Charlatans, and perhaps equally glorious in memory, if less individualistic, his one professional part as a "super" with E. H. Sothorn in *The Proud Prince*.

In his synopsis of the dramatis personae of his comedy *Brief Moment*, S. N. Behrman wrote, "Sigrist is very fat, about thirty years old, and lies down whenever possible. He somewhat resembles Alexander Woollcott, who conceivably might play him."

"Why not?" said Guthrie McClintic, producer of the play.

"Certainly," said Woollcott when approached.

He played the entire part lolling on a sofa, making Algonquinesque wisecracks. It was his suggestion that he be billed not by name but merely as "A Gentleman of Quality." The management rejected the scheme, which would seem to possess possibilities of sensational effect, since all New York now knew Alexander Woollcott. By virtue of having become a professional, he joined the Actors Equity Association, but only as a junior member at half-dues. At the Lambs Club he was known as the senior child actor of the American stage.

*Brief Moment* opened on November 9, 1931. The ex-amateur stole the show. He loved the part, which was, of course, himself (he never played anything but himself professionally; perhaps never could have), and the public loved him in it.

<sup>1</sup> *Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play.*

Some of the experts concurred: Gilbert Gabriel, in the *American*, expressed his "fondest hopes for *Brief Moment*, its author, and for that most purring comedian, the Cheshire Woollcott."

"It is Mr. Alexander Woollcott who runs away with the evening's honours," said the *World-Telegram*. "Even in the lobby at an opening, Mr. Woollcott has seldom acted with more fervour and effectiveness."

Brooks Atkinson, in *The Times*, called the play "limp and, for half its length, apparently aimless," but approved the characterizations and the dialogue. Of the latter he wrote, "Mr. Woollcott tosses it across the footlights with a relish that the audience shares. . . . If he enjoyed himself as much as the audience last night enjoyed him, he must have been having a very good time."

John Mason Brown, in the *Evening Post*, was unfavourable to the play, "an over-sophisticated, sometimes very sagacious, and occasionally extremely amusing conversation on the problems of marriage," and mildly favourable to the comedy role. "Mr. Woollcott, the chief source of entertainment in Mr. Behrman's play, is not caught up by its non-existent plot. Indeed, he can disregard the action and concern himself with life."

Others were unenthusiastic but generally amiable. Percy Hammond employed his ever-ready finesse in refraining from a positive opinion as to the debutante's professional merits, remarking that "he has tried to wag his tongue while keeping it in his cheek" and continuing:

Mr. Alexander Woollcott, like all fat men, is proud of his tonnage. Since journalism and the radio have screened his person from public view, he now finds an outlet from privacy by appearing in a play where he may be seen in all his massive grandeur. As a newspaper critic for many years, employing his fine blend of old-fashioned sentiment and modern sophistication, he was a help to plays, players, and to those who patronize them. As an actor, he proves to be as good an end man as any comedian he ever praised. . . . I am glad that his debut as an actor was a victory.

Now that he was, indeed, a professional, he conceived a solemn sense of responsibility to his art. He studied its other and older exponents with passionate attention in search of the clue to its mysteries. Finally he had it! He had gone to see the Lunts, always the objects of his liveliest admiration, in a Sunday-night benefit performance of *Reunion in Vienna*, and called up Sam Behrman in a sort of ecstasy to tell him that the secret of acting had been revealed in their performance, and his own shortcomings as well. It was all in one thing; he had been



overstressing his lines. Repression was the word. Wonderful actors, the mighty ones of the profession, didn't strive and strain as he had been doing to get his speeches over to the audience. No; they "threw it away." (This is stage parlance for the subtle trick of seeming to lay no emphasis upon an important passage, but delivering it with what has the effect of casualness. It calls for perfect technique. Only the most accomplished actors can do it and contrive, while "throwing it away," to make themselves heard to the rear doors.)

"Anyway," writes Behrman, "on the Monday night's performance Aleck came to the theatre aflame with this new revelation. After the second act Louis Calhern, between whom and Aleck there was a strong liking, called the manager to his dressing-room in a panic. 'My God!' he said. 'I don't know what's happened to Aleck to-night. I simply can't hear one of my cues and I don't know how to tell him to speak up.'"

He could not know that the new professional had been sitting at the feet of the Gamaliel-Lunts and, under that inspiration, had been "throwing it away" with such artistic effect that not even the front row of the orchestra knew what he was talking about. The manager took charge and persuaded Aleck that he was not yet ready for ventures in the higher realms of stage technique. Whatever discomfiture he may have felt at the time, Aleck was able to laugh over it with Behrman later.

*Brief Moment* held the boards for 129 performances in New York and then went on the road, where its metropolitan sophistication had greater popular appeal. When, at length, the receipts fell off, the management suggested a cut which the cast accepted. All but "Harold Sigrist." He was the hit of the show, practically irreplaceable; he knew it and used it to his full advantage by countering the management's request for a reduction with a demand of his own for a raise in salary. The not wholly irrelevant fact that he was part owner of the play may have helped him to get it. One may safely assume that this did not enhance his popularity with his fellow players.

The experience left him with an unsated lust for glory. Like Mr. Dickens, he found the impersonal approach of the printed word lukewarm and unsatisfying. He longed for the one and only authentic spotlight. A few tentative propositions were advanced, none of them tempting enough. Producers were shy of him. In anything short of exactly the right part in exactly the right play, he would be a flop.

Besides, he was difficult to handle, particularly on the business side. So he must reluctantly revert to the duller business of authorship.

Aleck was now pretty much alone as regards family ties. William was living in Baltimore; the younger brother saw little of him. The other two meant nothing to Aleck. Julie, irremediably lonely after her husband's death, fell ill of an obscure brain ailment and died, tenderly watched over by the brother whom she had reared. As long as her mind was receptive in any degree, he made time in his overcrowded existence to go to the private hospital daily and read to her. He took her ashes to the Phalanx and there buried them without ritual, thus holding to the ancient tradition.

"She was perfume, now scattered on the grass," he wrote sadly to Lucy Drage, her closest friend. "For a time I think I invented things to preoccupy me, made a great pother about work to be done, ran round and round in busy little circles, anything rather than sit down and face the fact that there was no Julie any more and never would be again." To the end of his life, he celebrated every anniversary of Julie's birth by sending a long letter to Mrs. Drage.

There was no lack of other companionship. Wit's End became a way station for a strangely assorted confluence of people; Alice Longworth, William Gillette, "Wild Bill" Donovan, the Lunts, Marc Connelly, the Swopes, Noel Coward, the Franklin Adamses, Mrs. Pat Campbell, Thornton Wilder, Henry Ke-an Yuan, the Barrymores, Helen Hayes, the Theodore Roosevelts, Ruth Gordon, and the inevitable run of visiting celebrities, Broadway rounders, and Hamilton alumni. At this period he was, or fancied himself (if there be any distinction), in love with Miss Gordon.

What had been luxury now approached grandeur. His habitat was one of the most expensive of Metropolitan apartment houses. He had his valet, chauffeur, and quasi-companion, Arthur Treadwell ("Junior"), to look after him. He went forth in a millionairish fur coat and a Minerva car, which he shared with Charles MacArthur. His entertainments were of Lucullan sumptuousness.

Every morning a special barber came by taxi from the St. Regis to shave his sparse and silky beard, which was a source of his own derisive comment, and returned, the richer by a handsome fee. Calling upon him one morning, Danton Walker, no longer his secretary but still doing occasional research for him, was received in the bathroom, where sat Aleck, facing the intimate portrait tile, his face lather-smear-

giving orders to Junior, directions to a secretary, dictation to an extra stenographer, and the day's culinary commands, leaping up from time to time to answer the telephone.

"It was a scene for a modern Hogarth," comments Walker.

None of this was by way of show; he lived that way because he liked it.

If the pressure of people became too great, he had now no ties or commitments that hampered him from packing up, on the whim of the moment, and going whither he pleased. On one of these trips, to Russia, he left Junior behind to housekeep for Jed Harris, who took over the apartment. The coloured youth's free-and-easy attitude did not commend him to Harris, who never knew quite how to take him. Relations became definitely strained when Junior, in the act of serving the breakfast coffee, paused and remarked meditatively: "You know, Mr. Harris, I had a grandfather who was a Jew."

Before leaving on that Russian trip, Aleck put into practice a technique which, as it developed, immeasurably broadened his popularity; he made inquiries among Russian acquaintances in New York as to what simple commodity or luxury was most in demand in Moscow and Leningrad. It must be light of weight, not too bulky, inexpensive, and easy to transport. Having acquired the necessary information, he stocked up on the product, and upon arrival established himself as the social hit of the season by distributing his largesse and in some small measure appeasing a famine.

To every house where he was socially indebted he gave a roll of toilet paper.

In Moscow he found himself, as he walked the streets clad in the elegance of his fur coat, flowing tippet, glossy seal cap, and brandishing a gold-headed cane, the centre of an attention that was not only flattering but peculiarly personal. Pedestrians paused to stare at him with hospitable grins. Passers-by in equipages waved gaily and sometimes called out. If he paused on a corner, small crowds gathered, chuckling and pointing. Though there was no hostility in their manner, the foreigner began to suspect a mild derision. He got the clue when a massive and courteous gentleman took him by the arm and turned him about to confront a hoarding upon which a government poster was glued. The astounded American beheld in the central figure what appeared to be a monstrous but unhappily obvious caricature of himself, even to his apparel.

Feverishly seeking a translation, he discovered that the bloated figure represented the False God of Capitalism.

Admiration took a more immediately personal form one noon when the rotund visitor was standing on a street corner in contemplation of the passing show. A thin Russian youth paused in front of him, stared at the opulent curve of his waistcoat, and with a murmured apology, reverently rubbed his hand once over the arc of good feeding, after which ceremonial he withdrew clucking to himself.

He brought back from Russia, in exchange for his tissued gifts, a liking for the people and a tempered admiration for many of the governmental methods.

Another of his journeys took him farther afield, to accept an overdue invitation. On one of his frequent returns to the campus, he had met and become interested in Henry Ke-an Yuan, a son of Yuan Shih-kai, who was President of China from 1912 to 1916. The father had scattered his large family of sons among a number of carefully selected American universities and colleges, to obtain an Occidental education. *Young Harry, entering Hamilton in the class of 1928, was well liked, joined one of the best fraternities, and proceeded to have a good time and make a fair scholastic record until his junior year, when he ran into an obstacle in Philosophy 1-2. For the final examination he turned in a paper consisting of two Chinese ideographs, darkly suspected of being obscene, with the logical result that he was flunked.*

Oriental honour, it seems, was wounded. By way of re-establishing it, Harry gathered a pocketful of rocks, went on the hill, and blasted the front windows out of the trustee meeting-room. He was expelled and went to nearby Colgate, an institution which all good Hamilton men, with their cultural tradition, affect to despise as a "Pigskin Polytechnic," unduly devoted to athleticism. The sage of Hamilton '09, who was wont to term it "an institution maintained as a refuge for persons expelled from Hamilton," deplored his Chinese friend's shift as "a fate more hideous than death."

Woolcott wrote a letter of sympathy to the involuntary alumnus, and in reply received an urgent invitation, good without notice, to visit the Yuan family any time after the writer should have returned. At this time Aleck had never seen the Far East. Why not try out the Chinese hospitality of which he had heard much? In 1931 he set out for the Orient to meet his young friend.

He changed his skies but not his manners in running across the sea.

The late John W. Thomason, Jr., author, artist, and Marine, gave a luncheon for the traveller whom he annoyed by coming down stairs late, clad in white breeches, riding-boots, and the maroon blazer of the U.S. Marines polo team. Aleck returned the annoyance with interest by announcing in his best theatrical manner:

"Enter, the gentleman of the chorus."

He left none of his barbed arrows behind (writes John Goette, war correspondent and author, then living in China). In Peking he was a luncheon guest of the correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*. Woollcott asked a question about Chinese affairs and the *Guardian* man brought out his clipping book by way of verification. The correspondent flushed with anger over Woollcott's "So you can't resist reading to me from your favourite author." . . . Meeting the *London Times* correspondent at several functions, Woollcott brusquely asked him: "Do you never do anything but sit around in other people's houses?"

The Londoner retaliated by naming a stray mongrel pup, bowlegged and sag-bellied, Alexander Woollcott. This is only one of a dozen such uncomplimentary christenings. Aleck took note of their significance, astutely commenting on the fact that all his canine namesakes were male offspring of female mothers.

The Yuans entertained Aleck sumptuously and variously. They had eight palaces in which they entertained a couple of hundred family retainers and a regiment or so of servants.

"As you see," their guest wrote home, "they live just like the Swopes."

Trouble was awaiting the returned traveller at Wit's End. Some Middle Western friends of the Swopes were seeking a foothold in New York. Swope recommended to them the thirty-room triplex apartment at the Campanile vacated by Josiah Cosden. It suited them well. They made an offer for it. Under the communal plan no sale of an apartment could be effected without unanimous consent of the tenants. Woollcott objected. With his customary moderation and restraint, he said that the man was a bounder if not a crook, and the wife a tramp, a vulgarian, and a social calamity, and both of them flagrant climbers. They were blackballed.

Enraged, Swope accused Woollcott of being actuated by anti-Semitism. Nothing could be more absurd. More than half of Woollcott's closest friends were Jews. He said quite frankly that, on the whole, he preferred them to Christians; and he once humorously reflected, in

my presence, upon the probability of his being accused of anti-gentilism, which, he considered, would be "a vicious sort of race prejudice." Naturally, Swope's accusation hurt. Nevertheless, Aleck's protest was, for him, eminently mild and reasonable. But the split did not heal.

The relations between the two had been close, but never firm. While on *The World* staff, Woollcott did not feel towards his boss the same pious veneration he had accorded Carr Van Anda, though he was too thorough a newspaperman not to recognize the Executive Editor's brilliant attainments. As has been said, he blamed Swope for the deterioration of the Thanatopsis poker from a friendly game to a dog-eat-dog gambling operation. Swope had become a rich man, and his former employee thought that with wealth (concerning which he retained always his Phalansterish suspicions) Swope's standards of association were altering for the worse.

"Herbert thinks he's going social when he's only going financial" was one of the wisecracks which Broadway credited to Woollcott.

Matters were not improved when Woollcott, now contemplating permanent abandonment of New York, hired away from the Swopes Joseph Hennessey, who had been managing their extensive Long Island estate. Hennessey, who besides being a business man, was a bibliophile—he had combined the two skills in conducting a rare-book enterprise on Madison Avenue—acted as the Woollcott general factotum and, later, as watchdog over the ageing writer's health as well as his finances. The Swopes never forgave his defection. Hence the Campanile imbroglio served to exacerbate a condition already inflamed. Aleck referred to it as "a local squabble which has, I think, left none of the Swopes except Ottie" (the son) "speaking to me."

Both men were masters of the cutting phrase. Hard words were spoken, reported, and returned with interest. By a tragedy of misjudgment on the part of its great founder, *The World* was dead. Joseph Pulitzer had made a disastrous will, taking the control of the paper from two sons who were able and devoted journalists, and vesting it in the cadet of the family, an amiable playboy. With the newspaper went the greatest force in the daily field for courageous and militant liberal thought. In the heat of controversy Woollcott publicly blamed the collapse upon the former Executive Editor, a charge as baseless, ill-natured, and unfair as Swope's anti-Semitic thrust. People took sides; a number of subsidiary friendships were loosened. It was an un-

happy phase of the Woollcott character that he could not fight his battles privately. He must involve others in his feuds, righteous or petulant. So far as he was concerned, for a time any friend of the Swopes was suspect.

The wretched affair inspired in him a distaste for Wit's End. He was resolved to get out of the place, to shake the metropolitan dust permanently from his feet.

Journalism beckoned: once again Woollcott felt the old urge to smell printer's ink and feel the excitement of racing with the clock for the goal of the first-edition deadline. This time, however, he would own his own paper and be his own boss.

New Canaan, Conn., where George T. Bye lives, is the end of a branch line and marks practically the eastern limit of daily commuting from New York. A solidly profitable weekly served the prosperous community. Not troubling to find out whether or not it was for sale, Woollcott cast acquisitive eyes upon the *New Canaan Advertiser*. It seemed a feasible project to purchase it, assemble a local staff of distinction, and turn out a true folk newspaper modelled upon William Allen White's famed *Emporia Gazette*, but with more verve and sparkle, a touch of the Algonquin sophistication as a concession to the metropolitan influence, plus the lure of conspicuous names. George Bye would look after the business end. Frank Sullivan would meet the trains. Heywood Broun would cover sports, movies, and amateur dramatics. What music there was would be attended to by Deems Taylor. To Beatrice Kaufman would be entrusted books and fashions. Contributions from F.P.A., Christopher Morley, and other celebrities, would illumine the pages. The name of Alexander Woollcott would head the editorial columns. Capital? That would be easy. Woollcott stood ready to finance the venture with a little assistance from his proposed staff, all of whom could afford to gamble. And this was really no gamble, in its projector's mind. Once the thing started, by-lines would spread its fame, circulation would flood in, advertising space be grabbed up, and profits logically follow. Subsequently Heywood Broun and his group did set up the *Connecticut Nutmeg*, on the same general plan. It lasted a year, afforded much amusement and some edification to a number of people, including its promulgators, and closed at a loss.

Journalism was not the only purpose of the New Canaan excursion; perhaps not even the primary one. The Phalanstere motif was singing

in Aleck's brain. Genius must be housed. He would rent, buy, or build a house with wings which should be barracks for the staff.

Bringing Mrs. Kaufman with him on a second trip to the suburb, he let it be known that he was a prospective land buyer. New Canaan was pleasurably wrought up over the impending accession to its fame. Realtors lined the street before the inn where the distinguished prospects were staying. Cars whisked them from site to site. Prices were quoted, listed, compared. There would be no difficulty about housing.

Satisfied upon this collateral point, Aleck turned his attention to the newspaper itself. Difficulties on this score do not appear to have presented themselves as a possibility until he learned on indubitable authority that the *New Canaan Advertiser* was not for sale, never had been for sale, and in the lifetime of the owner, Mr. John E. Hersam, would not be for sale. Checkmate.<sup>1</sup>

Country journalism was out. The inn project still remained a possibility. After some exploration, Aleck and Bea Kaufman settled on Katonah, N.Y., rented a house, and started a club on the co-operative principle, with Jo Hennessey as manager. It accommodated ten people, and throughout the one winter of its existence was kept full over week-ends, with a long and eager waiting-list in abeyance.

## 19

### ISLE OF UNREST

METROPOLITAN life could never satisfy phalanx-bred Woolcott. "Against New York I have had a phobia since the first day I saw it," he once declared. The world was too much with him. Getting and spending did not lay waste his powers—both came too easy for that—but they failed to round out his desires.

There were no attics in New York, he complained, and what was home without an attic? He wanted a place where he could spread out "the chance memorabilia of a family," though he had no family nor any apparent likelihood of acquiring one. What he really wanted was

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Hersam does not recall any direct offer having been made to him by Woolcott or any agent of his.



an inn. The communal idea still lingered in his heart. He dreamed of a reversion to the co-operative form of living, conducted "by an old Phalanxer."

Five and a half hours' motor ride from New York lies Lake Bomoseen, green-studded with mountain islets. One of these, Neshobe, had been acquired by Enos Booth, a young lawyer and sportsman from New York. Sally Farnham, the sculptress, a friend of Mr. and Mrs. Booth (Christine Normand), had visited the island and been captivated by its rocky and forested loveliness. She was one of a group which met frequently at the Everley Davis home on the New Jersey Palisades to play croquet; Neysa McMein, Janet Flanner, Raymond C. Ives, and Alexander Woollcott. She took the crowd up to see the Booths, they fell in love with the spot, formed a club, and bought the property.

Ives was elected president. Initiation was \$1,000 and dues were \$100 a year. In the beginning, standards were simple. Kerosene lamps supplied light, an old-fashioned stove provided heat; the plumbing was of the woodland type. Communication with the mainland, five-sixths of a mile away, was by red flag. If a guest or an important message arrived, William Bull, a native Vermonter who represented the necessary terminal facilities and acted as liaison agent, ran up the flag, a boat put forth from the island, establishing connection, or Mr. Bull acted as transport. Later his son Howard took over these duties, and subsequently joined the Woollcott entourage as a general utility man.

The original housekeeping arrangements of the island were in the hands of a man-of-all-work known as Bathless Bill and a cook with whom he lived in sin and a considerable degree of dissension. An element among the membership liked primitive conditions. The simple life with all its rigours was what they came up there for. The coarse cooking was good for their jaded digestions. Bathless Bill, they insisted, lent an atmosphere to the place, which, in a sense, was undeniable. Let well enough alone was their motto.

Another and larger faction was for comfort, verging to luxury. Thus there developed what was to go down in island history as the Revolt of the Classes against the Masses. Led by Woollcott, the Classes demanded running water, electric lights, and a refrigerator. There was a bloodless battle, ending in complete victory for the Luxury Legion. Dues were raised, the cuisine became elaborate; Bathless Bill and his consort were pensioned, the era of good living set in, and nobody

resigned. Without the others quite knowing how it was accomplished, and with no objections on the part of anyone, Aleck unofficially took over the establishment as his private playground. He established the social tone of the place, exercised a censorship over the guest list, and became a benevolent dictator. His own hospitality was prodigious: what he paid into the treasury on this account practically carried the overhead. Had a visitors' register been kept, its pages would have brought a price from an autograph dealer. In certain circles it even became a cachet of distinction to be invited to Bomoseen.

Unofficial control did not suffice. Aleck paid off the mortgage, acquired half the island in his own name, and built a stone house overlooking the more modest club, with bathrooms done in green-veined Vermont marble, and the very toilet seats and lids constructed of extravagantly costly plastic to match. The house became and remained his only permanent home. He sold the Campanile apartment, distasteful to him ever since the Swope feud, to Noel Coward.

Aleck's island sobriquet was *Der Führer*. He was cast for that part in an elaborate movie written by Howard Dietz and Charles Lederer, photography by Tanis Guinness Dietz, and played by Alice Duer Miller, Neysa McMein, Beatrice Kaufman, Harold Guinzburg, and Harpo Marx. The climax came with the burning at the stake of Führer Woollcott after he had kicked his croquet partner for failure to go through a wicket. There was talk of producing it for a wider audience, but it came to nothing. The captions were adjudged too spirited for public consumption.

The atmosphere of the island was a strange blend of Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass vagaries, the prankishness of Kipling's schoolboys, and the intellectual gymnastics of Information Please, with a touch of Mr. Canfield's gambling hell thrown in. Athletics were represented by croquet; and croquet upon the island "lawn," hewn out of virgin forest, with the contours of a roller coaster and frequent extrusions of primordial rock or giant tree root, was a pastime to be shunned by the uninitiate. The champion of that eccentric landscape wrote:

... it is no game for the soft of sinew and the gentle of spirit. The higher and dirtier croquet can use the guile of a cobra and the inhumanity of a boa constrictor. Then, the general physique of a stevedore comes in handy, too.

As in all other contests, Aleck was a gambler at croquet. In a five-game match at the Swope place on Long Island he and Neysa McMein

took on Swope and A. Charles Schwartz for \$1,000 a side. Bets at Neshobe were more modest. Sport for sport's sake was the motto; ten dollars per mallet per game, the limit. Rivalry was none the less keen. Boating parties in adjacent waters would pause, alarmed at the stridency of argument, and bring back reports to the mainland of riot and prospective murder. Bea Kaufman, wandering down from the club, discovered Harpo Marx weeping behind a gnarled oak. His ball had been "booted" for the fifth time into the outlying forest, and his fighting spirit had broken.

Aleck took his game seriously and kept in his library a forty-eight-page handbook, which he was suspected of studying surreptitiously, *Croquet*, by "Captain."

When pinned down, Aleck would concede that on the home grounds he was the best player, with Harpo and Charles Schwartz close on his heels. Otto H. Kahn and Charles MacArthur he ranked as the worst. Among the women, Neysa McMein held first place, close pressed by Kathleen Norris and Dorothy Parker, Alice Duer Miller, who "brings to the game a certain low cunning," being the only other female worthy of mention in that company.

Evenings were devoted to the feast of reason and the flow of soul, with a ten-dollar side bet. Anagrams was the favourite game, but there was also a fearsome pastime based on the crossword-puzzle principle, in which no word of less than nine letters could qualify. At dinner Aleck would wait for an interval of silence, or, if the waiting were too long, impose it and propound, "My name begins with P."

Thereupon the assembled company, following an esoteric formula, would interrogate him in turn, somewhat after the Twenty Questions fashion, in the attempt to identify the personification, be it Lydia Pinkham or Mr. Pickwick.

Less punditical games would follow: cribbage, chess, or backgammon. Aleck was a hard loser. He had been known to kick a precious ivory chess set high in the air and retire to lick his wounds until morning.

The experience-wise Junior used to say, "When he reaches for his cheque-book at the end of the game, I just goes away from there."

Within those precincts the island *Führer* exercised a despotism which justified the title. Having lunched at Sardi's one unseasonably warm spring noon, Dorothy Parker and Charles Lederer conceived an irresistible yearning for the blue waters and green woods of Bomoseen,

Without going to the formality of telegraphing, they packed their belongings and met on the train, where they figured up finances and found that they had twenty dollars between them and no return tickets. That was all right; as Aleck's guests they would have few expenses to meet; only some tips to the servants. So it might have turned out but for two circumstances: the first, that they dozed through Castleton, the place of debarkation for Bomoseen, and had to disburse their twenty dollars for a car to take them back from the distant stop; the second, that Aleck had recently read and been deeply impressed with a novel by Evelyn Waugh, wherein an explorer, rescued from the jungle by a remote planter, is held and compelled to read Dickens aloud to his saviour for the rest of his life.

Unhappily for the two New Yorkers who had planned on a week-end visit, Aleck was companionless on his island (a condition that he hated) when they arrived and explained their penniless state. He delivered his ukase.

"Here you are: here you stay."

As neither of them cared to swim the icy waters to the mainland, there was nothing to do but accede. For three weeks they ministered to their captor's whims, played croquet by day and brain-teasers in the evening and listened to the tideless flow of Woolcott conversation. It was not a bad life, but it palled.

One morning their host said mildly, "Isn't it about time you left?"

"What on?" they asked.

"I will arrange that."

He took them to Castleton, bought their tickets, gave them two dollars and a half apiece spending money, and bade them good-bye. That there was no break or diminution in their tripartite friendship reflects credit upon somebody, though I am not quite sure whom.

Infringement of his prerogative was sternly repressed by the benevolent tyrant. At a Neshobe week-end where he was a guest, Noel Coward announced after dinner that he would read to the company the first act of his new comedy, *Point Valaine*. Now, while it is true that none in that gathering had urged the actor-playwright to perform, it is equally true that, even to the most sophisticated of groups, a pre-hearing of a Coward play would be something of an event.

Not to Alexander Woolcott. This was *his* stage, not Noel Coward's or another's. If he did not read from his works, why should anybody

else presume to offer alien fare? He fixed the volunteer with a stony stare.

"Where?" he said icily.

As the room where they were sitting was the only possible auditorium except the great outdoors, the performance was indefinitely postponed.

Moderate in his use of alcohol, Aleck resented over-indulgence on the part of friends and visitors. One of the most distinguished of European correspondents, a friend of Woollcott's since the World War, became overstimulated on cocktails and treated the company to a braggart half-hour of autobiography. At the close, his host addressed him to such withering effect that he left before breakfast the next morning. A parallel episode pointed the moral in both directions.

An even more distinguished globe-trotter and author on his second day at the club took one of the feminine guests to the mainland on a shopping tour which turned out to be more alcoholic than mercantile. They failed to turn up for the afternoon croquet, a gross breach of island punctilio. At cocktail time they were reported to be at a local inn, holding high revel. Dinner hour came, but the errant guests were still missing. Contrary to his usual moderation, the host was stimulating his wrath in a series of old-fashioned cocktails in balloon glasses. A hard storm blew up from the west. When someone suggested a rescue party to the mainland, he said impressively: "Any friend of mine who gets drunk may break his neck for all of me and I wouldn't give a good goddam."

On top of this he had several more drinks, the last of which he took to the table with him. The soup was before him as he seated himself. He closed his eyes. His head drooped sleepily. There was a plunge, a splash, and the major portion of the bisque, displaced, spattered abroad. Aleck lifted his visage, dried it carefully, and said in a clear and ringing voice, "In any case, I do not like drunkenness either in myself or anyone else."

The weather-beaten truants drifted in at nine o'clock, to meet a reception of stony disfavour. The woman was subsequently forgiven and restored to the Woollcott affections, but her partner in crime was banned from the island for ever more.

Autocrat though he was, Aleck did not have everything his own way. His fellow members at least once ganged up on him with memorable effect. He had been regaling them with his sensational, if unsub-

stantiated, discovery that an ancient silver design, displayed at the Chicago Exposition, was the veritable container of the Holy Grail, a theory which he had expounded with romantic fervour in an article for *Cosmopolitan*, then in proof. The "two Charlies," MacArthur and Lederer, concocted a telegram for delivery from the mainland by Howard Bull. It read:

LUNATIC CONFESSES. CHALICE OF ANTIOCH DISCOVERED TO BE FAKE. STOP COPY.  
HUTCHINS.

The signature was assumed by the recipient to be from his friend, President Robert Maynard Hutchins of Chicago University. He sat up late, writing and rewriting letters and telegrams on the subject.

The second day's bombshell was a double-header. Aleck had three pet hates at this period, Charles Hanson Towne, "Michael Strange" (John Barrymore's ex-wife), and Elsa Maxwell. When the day's croquet match was at a crucial point, Beatrice Kaufman addressed Aleck, who was about to make a closed shot:

"I forgot to tell you my news."

The player looked up. "What is it?"

"Brooks Atkinson has resigned from *The Times* and Charley Towne is taking over."

"I don't believe it!" shouted Aleck. He "flinched" his shot, banged himself on the side of his foot, and lost the game.

At the dinner table Tanis Dietz said casually: "Maybe Charley Towne will review the play about you, Aleck."

"What play about me?" he demanded.

"Hadrn't you heard?" said Mrs. Dietz innocently. "Michael Strange has used you as central figure in her new play. I understand it's very realistic."

This so preyed on his mind that he lost forty dollars at anagrams, passed a restless night, and arose in a flurry of nerves. When the red flag went up on the Bull staff he was expectant of the worst. Bea Kaufman volunteered to take the boat over for the message. She came back, looking dubious.

"I'm afraid you won't like this, Aleck."

"Well, what is it? Don't stand there like an imbecile. Let's have it."

"Elsa Maxwell is on her way from Stöckbridge and will be here in time to lunch with us."

"Not me!" cried Aleck wildly. "I'm leaving."

He was packed for departure before they relented and relieved his spirit.

Legends have gathered about the place, some of which have been perpetuated by the chief figure, in his writings. Harpo Marx arrived in a congeries of spare parts masquerading as a car, which he had borrowed from Ben Hecht. Aleck surveyed the clattering antique with amazement.

"What's that?" he asked.

"That," said Harpo, "is my town car."

"What town?" said Aleck. "Pompeii?"

A party of picnickers, innocently landing at the far end of the island on the supposition that it was uninhabited, came back to the mainland with a dire tale of having heard voices in murderous altercation (the usual croquet game) and being pursued by a naked wild man, painted blue, who chased them to their boat with hideous roars. (Harpo, returning from a swim, had spied the intruders, endued himself with some effective stripes from a blue crayon, and put on a one-man show.)

A visiting fisherman guided by a local boatman passed the dock where Aleck, bulging meatily from an inadequate bathrobe, was asleep in the sun.

"Who on earth is that?" asked the outlander.

"Marie Dressler," replied the taciturn native without the quiver of an eyelid.

"You don't say! I'd like to get a picture of her," said the stranger, reaching for his camera. "Can you edge the boat in quietly?"

Peering through his lens, the snapshotter noticed certain phenomena which made it seem improbable that the figure could be Miss Dressler or, indeed, Miss Anyone Else.

"Who did you say it was?" he asked his guide.

"Feller named Kessler," returned the Vermonter imperturbably. "Kind of a natural. There ain't no harm in him."

Sunning himself on that same picr, Charles MacArthur was edified at hearing some local boatmen surmise that he was Irving Berlin. Always willing to oblige, even at the sacrifice of a friend's reputation, the playwright burst into song, rendering with something less than the composer's virtuosity, "All Alone," "Remember," "Alexander's Rag-time Band," and other Berlin selections. That part of Vermont still considers Irving Berlin's voice grossly overpraised.

Life on the island was brightened by the presence of two dogs:

Cocaud, a clownish, amiable, and clever poodle (named after Aleck's old friend, Mme Cocaud of the Savenay bistro), and Duchess, a coal-black German shepherd bitch who is, I think, the most polished, the best-mannered, and altogether the most fascinating non-human I have ever met. She was a gift of gratitude from The Seeing Eye, where she had flunked her tests because of an invincible impulse to drop everything, including her blind and helpless charge, upon the approach of a thunderstorm, and scuttle under the nearest bed, there to cower until all was over. Duchess, while hardly Cocaud's intellectual equal, was more popular with guests, and preened herself upon this, being, indeed, a good deal of a coquette. Her master wrote of her:

In the company of any large male dog she suddenly becomes almost unbearably ingénue, developing the most winsome mannerisms, and somehow managing something equivalent to baby-talk.

There was a mutual fondness between Aleck and the two animals.

An occasional visitor to Neshobe was Charles Brackett, whose earlier fictional presentation of Woolcott had so delighted its subject. Now the novelist must write another book, this time about the island and its habitués. So far as Woolcott was concerned, Brackett was assured of *carte blanche*.

Thus absolved, he really let himself go. The result, *Entirely Surrounded*, is a slight and witty picture of an island summer home where the New York intelligentsia gather about Thaddeus Hulbert, the host. He is pictured as "dwarfing the girth of a great leather chair. . . . He seemed one gigantic drop of human flesh. . . . In the centre of his large face was a regulation collection of small features, almost lost. As though to safeguard them against such disaster, thick spectacles emphasized the eyes."

Again Woolcott was charmed. Reviewing the novel appreciatively in *McCall's Magazine*, he admits to having read three times "the malignly clever piece of cartooning."

It is a picture of some of New York's more conspicuous practitioners of the arts when not engaged in burgling. One of them is an acrid and frolicsome behemoth who writes pieces for the magazines and also functions as a broadcaster. At first I was disturbed by the fact that this creature bore a haunting, if flagrantly defamatory, resemblance to someone I knew.

He made it compulsory reading for guests of the island and bought a score of copies for distribution by mail.



Sleep was when you were lucky enough to get it, on Neshobe. Aleck was no respecter of the clock. If he was awake, why should anyone else be asleep? On her first visit, when she was not yet habituated to the Woolcott ways, Mrs. W. Parmer Fuller, a visiting Californian, was awakened at 2 a.m. by a determined hammering on her door. Thinking that, at the least, the house must be afire, she sat up in bed.

"What is it? What's happened?"

"Get up," said her host's voice, bland and eager. "I've just finished something I want to read to you."

No matter what his nocturnal exploits, he made a habit of rising at six-thirty, taking a plunge in the lake, and sitting down to a hearty breakfast at seven. The breakfast-table session might be prolonged until ten or eleven if Aleck was in conversational mood, which was likely to be the case.

It must not be inferred from what has been cited above that Neshobe was wholly given over to amusement and frivolity. Any friend who wished to use the place as a working refuge was welcome, provided that there was room. Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht completed their motion-picture script of *Wuthering Heights*, writing in the big clubroom by day and playing chess or cribbage in the evenings. Ethel Barrymore brought up the script of *The Corn Is Green* for final reading and consultation with Woolcott. Cornelia Otis Skinner, when social pressure interfered with writing at her too-accessible home in Woodstock, would wire Aleck and cross the hills to inaccessible Neshobe, there to finish up one of her monologues and perhaps profit by the expert advice which was always generously available to any of Woolcott's professional friends. On the forest-surrounded badminton court, she did most of the studying and revision of *Edna, His Wife*, to the gratification of the two dogs who would accompany her and "sit while I studied aloud and wag their tails with obvious glee whenever I went into any emotional scene, showing they inherited their master's talent for criticism."

Joseph Alsop inscribed on the flyleaf of his *The 168 Days*, "For Aleck, who fed, clothed, sheltered, and soothed the distressed author of this importunate volume during most of the period of its composition." S. N. Behrman found the island an ideal place for revision of a play, as did Moss Hart.

Thornton Wilder, Ethel Barrymore, and the Paul Bonners, seated around the table in after-breakfast conclave, planned the strategy of

the appeal for help to England of which Alexander Woollcott was the thrillingly expressive radio exponent in the Fight for Freedom campaign.

He had thought fondly of his new house, when it was building, as a refuge where George Kaufman and Dorothy Parker could write their respective plays and poems ("though about as mutually helpful as Leopold and Loeb") and Alice Miller tap out her serials for *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Thornton Wilder found the environment too distracting for settled work; the atmosphere was supercharged with mental electricity. However, one could always get away from it. As I can testify from experience, a visitor who brought a job with him received every consideration and convenience: seclusion, quiet, freedom from interruption, and all the necessary paraphernalia of his trade. Aleck was too conscientious a workman not to respect the labour of others.

To the Bomoseen natives, the island was a mixture of Valhalla and madhouse. They were not unduly elated by the incursion of the great and near-great: nothing of that sort can add to the communal self-esteem of the Vermonter; he is too sure of himself and his state. But Bomoseen, thanks to the Neshobites, frequently figured in the papers, which was good for trade. The visitors, with a few tactless exceptions, respected stiffnecked local pride.

To understand the countryside's qualified acceptance of its famous neighbour, the case of the Skinners may be cited in elucidation. They lived at Woodstock, Vt., some thirty miles from Bomoseen. There they were accepted without reservation—not because Otis Skinner was the *doyen* of the American stage and one of its foremost exponents in authorship; Maud, his wife, a former actress of standing, and Cornelia Otis, his daughter, a *diseuse* and authoress of national reputation; but because his grandfather had been an occasional "supply" for the pulpit of the Universalist church at nearby Proctorville, the family seat.

No such advantage accrued to Alexander Woollcott. He had no roots in Vermont. The Vermonters accepted him because with them he was simple, natural, and friendly without trying to be overfriendly, and never thought of "smoothing" them, being much too wise for that. But when he ran for trustee of the Castleton Public Library, they defeated him decisively. No foreigner need apply! In any case, the state that bred Calvin Coolidge and with only Utah in support gave its electoral vote to William Howard Taft's second candidacy was not

likely to elect a Democrat to any office, however humble. Later, the rejected candidate thought of running for United States Senator, but more for educational purposes than with any expectation of being elected.

The Bomoseen "help" was, for the most part, recruited from the locality and enjoyed a unique position. Young Howard Bull, who acted as messenger and did odd jobs about the place, was a regular participant at croquet and badminton, and a friend of the club members. Aleck took him about on many of his trips. For two summers a pretty young local girl was hired as waitress. She was a schoolteacher on the other side of the lake. At meals she often joined in the talk, as she was expected to do. For any guest to treat her otherwise than as an equal would be to incur savage reprisals from the head of the table. This easy democracy was a logical holdover from the Phalanx influence.

She once posed a difficult problem for the host, whose consideration for his employees extended to prejudices which, in his friends, he would have dismissed as negligible. Two Hollywood stars of opposite sex came to visit Neshobe. Their relationship, charitably accepted in the film world, was not so readily adaptable to Vermont standards. What hope there might have been of keeping it tactfully cloaked was dissipated upon their arrival.

"You're rather crowded, aren't you?" said the glamour girl brightly. "You can just put us in together."

Aleck and Jo Hennessey, then club manager, held conference. What to do about the little schoolteacher?

"We'll tell her they're secretly married," said Aleck.

So the couple were assigned to a room in the new house, furnished with a large, old-fashioned bed which, having creaky springs, was locally known as the Informative Double. The visitors were thus made comfortable, but the host was not. For there appeared inopportunely in the papers an announcement of the couple's engagement. It was inconspicuous and escaped the Vermont girl's notice. But when the marriage did take place there would surely be a splurge of headlines.

After the departure of the stars, the two conspirators kept an anxious watch upon the daily press until the news did break. That day's newspapers were mysteriously lost in transit from the mainland to Neshobe, while, at the same time, the radio went inexplicably wrong. If the Vermonter ever did learn the truth, she held her tongue about it.

One misconception about the island has been widely disseminated:

that Aleck made a practice of inviting his friends to visit him and, at the close of their stay, presenting them with a formidable bill. This was, in fact, done in one instance (and may have been in more, though I have not learned of any other authentic case), the guest being a pal who, during his stay, had won several hundred dollars from the host at cribbage. The bed-and-board charge was Aleck's not oversportsmanlike attempt to get even in part. There was no hard feeling about the bill; the guest could well afford it.

The rule of the place in its latter phase was partly commercial, but straightforwardly so. A selected list of people received notice that they had been put on the roster of the Neshobe Club as associate members and within certain dates could enjoy the privileges of the island at a stated charge. As Margaret McCloud, the cook (and a considerable figure in the life of the place), was an artist—she had to be, since cooking for Alexander Woolcott's greedy and discriminating palate was no sinecure—the charge of \$7.50 per day, *tout compris*, was certainly far from exorbitant.

Never after taking up his residence at Bomoseen did Aleck feel the slightest desire to return permanently to New York: "Never so much as a twinge of nostalgia," he recorded. Yet there were times when he felt suffocated by too-pressing companionship, and he was then unfit company for himself or anyone else. "You will find a good deal of testimony that the island is even pleasanter with me off it," he wrote Al Getman. More than once he surreptitiously fled the crowd and turned up vicariously by telegram next morning.

Although never officially the head of the club, Woolcott was its leading spirit, so recognized by general acquiescence shortly after its inception, much as he had become the unofficial chieftain of the Algonquin tribe. How did he achieve this suzerainty in a group most of whom were his intellectual peers? Partly by default: nobody cared to dispute the ground with him. More because the others were genuinely fond of him: he had, notwithstanding his frequent violation of the amenities, a talent for friendship. There cannot be excluded a certain political adroitness which he practised when he judged it expedient. I have heard him chuckle over the method by which he jockeyed out of the organization a member with whom he was at odds. Chiefly, however, his supremacy was due to force of personality, a powerful determination to get his own way regardless of other considerations, and a ready assumption of leadership.

In the world of commercial activity, these attributes are highly regarded. Their possessor becomes a captain of industry or a king of finance. Of more dubious repute in social life, they nevertheless produce similar results.

Alexander Woollcott was a self-made autocrat.

## 20

## HEAR YE! HEAR YE! HEAR YE!

THE radio saved Alexander Woollcott. High-grade though his literary wares were, they were becoming shopworn. He had rung the interminable changes upon his stock subjects; his friends, his dogs, his mysteries, his favourite murders, his war experiences; in newspapers, in magazines, between book covers, on the lecture platform. It was done with inimitable art and wit, with infinite adroitness. But it was done too often. Editors were becoming restive.

A *Cosmopolitan* scout was sent to sound out Woollcott about doing a series of articles for the magazine, and returned with a favourable report.

"Do you think he's got the subjects?" asked the editor.

"Why not?" the scout replied. "His memory is unimpaired."

The author himself was becoming worried. Editorial tolerance could not indefinitely accept the rehash fare. He badly needed a new medium. The air waves afforded it. Once give him a start, and he could use the familiar material all over again for the entertainment of a new and untouched audience. There would be no blue pencil to interpose impertinent marginal queries about his thrice-told tales of Irving Berlin, Katharine Cornell, the Marx family, Father Duffy, Noel Coward, Vermont, George Kaufman, the Lunts, the Borden murder, the Verdun dog, and all the pleasing phantasmagoria of an absorbent and retentive memory.

Whatever the defects of his maiden appearance before the mike, Woollcott had made a minor success of his critiques as *The Early Bookworm* while hoping always for a broader field. His chance came when William S. Paley, president of the Columbia Broadcasting System,





TOWN CRIER

heard him and decided that, while he would never win the wide popularity accorded to a crooner or a professional funnyman, there was an individuality in his matter and manner that gave it potential "quality value." Columbia took over Woollcott from Mutual, and put him on a sustaining programme, where he remained more than a year before he got his chance.

The Chicago Automobile Show was putting on a gala Christmas performance; a two-and-three-quarter-hour feature with a popular orchestra, five bands, Heywood Brown, and other attractions. A master of ceremonies was wanted. Columbia suggested Alexander Woollcott at a price which was promptly accepted.

When Woollcott learned that he had been sold without previous notice, he gave a recognizable impersonation of a wounded jaguar. Was he a slave? Did the contract contain any clause permitting the company to make him the mouthpiece of, for example, a house of ill-fame? What the hell did they take him for? Who the hell did they think they were? They could be good and well goddamned!

Everybody from President Paley down tried to pacify him. He would have none of it. He retired, snarling and showing his teeth, and announced that all negotiations were off.

There was at that time on the Columbia staff a sprightly young person named Ann Honeycutt. To her consternation, she was assigned to call upon the recalcitrant writer and bring him to terms.

"Hey!" said the aggrieved Miss Honeycutt. "I'm a continuity writer, not an animal trainer."

It was explained to her that no more Christian martyrs were available for the arena except herself, and she owed it to the organization and so forth and so on.

"I don't even know him," she protested.

"Nonsense. Of course you know him. Everybody knows him."

"Well, he doesn't know me. He passed me in the hallway yesterday as if I were a lamp-post."

"Somebody's got to do it. The time is getting short."

The reluctant envoy might truthfully have pleaded that she had returned home on the previous night only after and because all the other places had closed, and was feeling far from sturdy. On further consideration she decided that whether she lived or died was a matter of small concern to her, so she went out, had a brace, and pointed for the fateful apartment. It was then high noon.



On the way, her eye was struck by a superb flare of crimson in a florist's window. Some obscure impulse inspired her to buy two dozen of the expensive roses. Weighted down by the double burden of the box and her hangover, she rang the Woollcott bell. The master appeared, gnashing his jaws (or, at least, so it seemed to her). He blocked the entry.

"Who are you?"

"Ann Honeycutt."

"What does that mean, if anything?"

"I'm from the studio. Columbia, you know."

"Haven't I made it clear that I wish to have nothing further to do with anybody from Columbia?" he demanded in a frenzied pipe, and enlarged upon the theme.

Miss Honeycutt stood, drooping. When his eloquence momentarily flagged, she lifted her burden.

"Oh, very well!" said she flaccidly. "But you might as well have these, anyway. They're no use to me." She thrust the floral offering into his arms and, as he gave back a step, eased herself through the door into the hallway.

Dropping the roses upon a chair, Woollcott embarked upon a Ciceronian denunciation of CBS, its principles, practices, and personnel, ending in a thrice-intoned, "I won't do it! I won't do it! I won't do it!"

"Well, I wouldn't, myself," said she pacifically.

A faint mollification appeared upon the anger-flushed countenance.

"Eh? What's that?" He peered into her face. "You look terrible."

"I feel worse."

"What's the matter?"

"The last drink but one that I had was at five o'clock this morning."

"Would you like one now?"

"Oh, would I!"

"Come in and sit down." He mixed and handed her a highball, which she drank gratefully. "What you need is sleep," he pronounced.

"Oh, Doctor!" said Miss Honeycutt.

He threw open a door with a splendid gesture. "In there is my virginal couch. Stretch out. Be at peace. Fear nothing. I'll be thinking it over."

At five-thirty the guest, greatly refreshed, was gently shaken out of her slumbers to the sight of a benign face beaming down upon her:

"Here is your script," said Woollcott.

It was a masterpiece. It established its author as a high-grade extra-valuable article of radio merchandise.

The association with Miss Honeycutt developed into a minor Woollcott idyll until in a broadcast about dogs he quoted extensively from her book, *How to Raise a Dog in the City*, and neglected to give credit.

Columbia sold Woollcott, this time with no protest from him, to Cream of Wheat, for three broadcasts per week, at \$500 per broadcast. He set about devoting himself to his new occupation with the fervour and assiduity which a violin virtuoso accords his scales. He studied it from every angle. He adapted his mode of speech to it. When one of his earlier efforts was recorded and played back to him by the studio, he distressfully declared, "I never heard such a disgusting old croak in my life," and arranged for a series of lessons in voice production. Broadcasting, he said, "completely entralls me."

One definite asset he possessed, the device of the Town Crier with his bell. Paul Davis, an advertising man, had thought this up and sold it to him for a lump sum. That introductory "Ding-ding-dong! Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye!" was to become a distinctive slogan of the air waves.

He now marshalled the veteran legions of his pen to deploy across the air spaces as they had so often marched across the printed page, Verdun Belle in the van. Upon hearing that much-touted canine's virtues celebrated on the new medium, ex-Private Winterich, who had first encountered her on the copy-desk of *Stars and Stripes* more than a decade before, seized his pen and relieved his feelings.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since the late Spring of 1918 Verdun Belle has been supporting Alexander Woollcott. Her story has become a byword and a barking. I have heard it in the watchfires of a hundred circling camps . . . it has appeared in print (under various titles but always over the signature of Alexander Woollcott) in virtually every American periodical except the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Harvard Alumni Weekly*.

The Crier became a stylist, perhaps the first stylist of the art of radiolocution. His quietly introductory "This is Woollcott speaking" was an exudation of friendliness. He produced the effect of laying his hand on your shoulder and addressing you like an old and confidential

<sup>1</sup> *Squads Write*, by John T. Winterich,

comrade. It may be doubted whether any of his masculine rivals inspired the same personalized affection.<sup>1</sup>

His fan mail was vast, intimate, often emotional. He could command both laughter and tears. When he appealed for a charity, "You can make a dollar twitch in my pocket," Otto H. Kahn once told him. No broadcaster excelled him in naturalness, aplomb, and apparent ease. Yet his blood pressure habitually mounted twenty points while he was broadcasting. Edna Ferber wrote to him:

You've made even the Chicago Century of Progress seem glamorous. Manufacturers of oatmeal ought to get you to write their advertising, and the Spinach Growers' Association, and Palisades Park, and the Tulsa, Okla., Chamber of Commerce.

More than this—in fact, more than any other encomium of his radio days—the performer prized the ecstatic testimonial of a coloured cook as reported by her mistress:

"Dere's voodoo in dat voice an' glory in dem tales."

Popular in the broadest sense he never was; his highest Crossley rating was 6.5 as against a top of 43 for a highly touted comedian. This is, however, an inconclusive basis of estimate.

"Many factors enter into evaluating Crossley ratings," points out Earle McGill, his CBS director, in reference to Woolcott's status as a broadcaster. "A single individual with no large orchestra, spotted in the early part of the evening without any of the window-dressing of a big comedy programme, might be well off with a 6.5 rating."

Intensive study of radio programmes convinced the recruit that speaking over the air was as distinctive a technique as that of the stage, and the entire radio art was as yet in its "unpleasing adolescence." He presented a rough plan for a chair of radio speaking at Hamilton College, but the Board of Trustees failed to approve it. His own programmes were figured out in detail. A letter to John Moses, of the Field, Moses & Jones agency, serves to illustrate both his interest and his constructive capacity. After a prefatory paragraph on the difficulty of making "any really informative statement . . . because no one reading a recipe for mince pie would be able thereby to know how it was going to taste," he continues:

<sup>1</sup> I specify masculine purposely to exclude Mary Margaret McBride and Kate Smith, both of whom would have topped him in any rating of public devotion.

I envisage a series of twenty-six programmes to be done from New York of a Sunday afternoon. Each programme will be composed, like a bouquet or a dinner, of sundry ingredients. If any one of them is too local to be enjoyed in Texas and too mature to be comprehended by a high-school boy, then we have failed. Each will have me as impresario and intermittent performer. It will be a bouquet of jokes, sentiment, dramatic narrative, short plays, and music. Half the time the separate parts will be as unrelated as the separate acts of a first-rate vaudeville performance. From time to time, however, there would be additional interest imparted by the circumstances that every single item of the programme was contributing to a single design. Thus we might make one entire half-hour a serenade to some such universal favourite as Walt Disney or, let us say, on Lincoln's birthday (which happens to come on Sunday next year) the whole programme could be historical and patriotic in its contents.

For the writing of the sketches—these might be entirely original or dramatizations of some of the fundamental scenes in Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, or the Old Testament—I would want to get good writers and, for the performances, first-rate actors. In fact, I would like to put Robert Benchley, Groucho Marx, Alice Duer Miller, and Thornton Wilder to work on the writing of some five-minute plays and for the performance of them I expect to enlist from time to time such actors as Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, Katharine Cornell, Paul Muni, Noel Coward, Helen Hayes, Harpo Marx, Ina Claire, Ethel Barrymore, and the like.

For some time I have been watching with interest the frustration of first-rate talents by the bad habits of radio production. Thus some agency would pay Helen Hayes a fortune to do a script bought for next to nothing from some penny-a-liner. This script would be beneath contempt and often she wouldn't see it until a few hours before she was to go on the air. Inevitably the results are pretty punk. Work on such a series as I have in mind should begin at least two months in advance and throughout I see the impresario as the chef who has all his dishes under way at once. While he is stirring or salting one of them, the others are warming up on the back of the stove.

I am no slouch of a story-teller myself, and in the course of six months I would want to spin many a story of the kind that old wives have told around the fires at night since time out of mind, but I also know that Thornton Wilder could write a five-minute scene between a boy and a girl on the top of a bus that would make every listener from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, choke up. Ahead of me I see us serenading Anne Lindbergh under her window. I hear the Lunts, for the first time in their lives, playing the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. And nothing could drag me from the studio on the night we have Freddy Bartholomew and Mickey Rooney staging the greatest of all battles—the one between Tom Sawyer and the City Boy as it was fought in the Missouri dust long ago.

But none of these things can we do unless we have a full purse with which to engage the best talent in the country and—even more important—unless we have at least a two months start so that for the first time a good radio programme need not be put together with spit and paper clips a few hours before going on the air.

He could think up little ingenuities to enliven a programme. For his panegyric of Father Duffy he had a bugle sound the Last Post. His résumé of recent history, following Frederick Lewis Allen's pattern in *Only Yesterday*, was punctuated by the popular songs of the period. Filling an engagement with the "mike" from a post-operative hospital room, he started with a few pungent observations on the locale.

One of his cleverest schemes went awry through no fault of his own. The broadcast was on that sure-fire topic, dogs. He proposed to break off in the midst of it, with the crisply interpolated remark, "Is your dog in the room with you? Watch him now!"

Then he would blow upon one of those whistles whose pitch, too high in the scale for registry by the human ear, rouses a canine to rapt interest.

"Every dog within hearing will prick up his ears and come to attention," said Woollcott anticipatively. "It will be a big hit."

The studio heartily agreed and the programme was prepared for rehearsal. How the dogs might have reacted will never be known. Nobody had considered that unpredictable translator, the microphone. A dog was brought into an outer room, equipped with radio, for a check-up. The Town Crier delivered his line and blew his whistle. The dog merely looked bored. For the mike had transmuted what should have been a spirited summons into a sickly gargle worthy of Mrs. Leo Hunter's Expiring Frog. The experiment was dropped. There is no arguing with a microphone.

The Town Crier had come to the Columbia Studios with a solid reputation for ferocity. After the classic encounter with Miss Honeycutt, his fearsome repute was somewhat modified. In fact, the CBS officials who had prepared for conflict, having been forewarned of the Woollcott petulancies, were agreeably disappointed. They found him scrupulously faithful to whatever task he set for himself, amenable to suggestion and correction and—a prime radio virtue—accurate in timing. He thought nothing of telephoning to San Francisco or Seattle, or cabling to London, all at his own expense, to pick up some amusing anecdote or quotation for the embellishment of his matter. True, he

had his little fads, few of which were unreasonable. After a few trials he would have no announcer but Paul Douglas. Without an audience he could not, he thought, do himself justice: so, for each performance, he would gather around him a friendly court: the Lunts, Noel Coward, Gertrude Lawrence, Ruth Gordon, Dr. Gustav Eckstein when he was in town, Harpo Marx, Ethel Barrymore, Eleanora von Mendelssohn, Paul and Mrs. Robeson, Neysa McMein, Helen Hayes, the Paul Bonners, the Gerald Murphys, the Theodore Roosevelts.

Having prepared a special programme with music, the Town Crier asked Edward Klauber, a CBS vice-president, to listen in and give a frank opinion.

"Well? What do you think of it?" he inquired at the close.

"Dreadful," said Klauber. "It wasn't like you at all."

Aleck beamed. "I'm so glad," he said. "That's what I thought myself."

A harsher test came when the Red Cross asked him to put on an all-star radio show for its drive. He threw himself into the work with the unselfish fervour which he characteristically devoted to any cause that enlisted his sympathies.

Ethel Barrymore was drafted from Chicago, Orson Welles from Hollywood, the Chicago Symphony was to play, there was a soloist from the Metropolitan Opera and the Negro choir from *Porgy and Bess*—a super-production. On the morning of the broadcast, the Town Crier sent for S. James Andrews, in charge of the programme.

"My boy," said Aleck in his most amiable manner, "the way this show lines up, it doesn't look quite right. It needs a last word—just a word—from me to round it out. I've sat up most of the night preparing it."

The "word" was a solid type page—reading time, two minutes—for a programme already crowded. Andrews tried to explain that the show was "tight"; no room for expansion. The broadcaster waved him away.

"I've given up a night's sleep, working this out, and I don't want a syllable cut. If you work on it the way you fellows sometimes do, you'll only spoil my rhythm."

Desperately seeking expedients, Andrews got Ethel Barrymore, always the most amenable of performers, to speed up; he cut out the choir and was all set when, at the last minute, with orchestra ready and Aleck's little court of listeners grouped at the studio, an appalling

message came in from Hollywood. Mr. Welles had underestimated his time: the reading would have to have an extra minute—and there was no minute to be had except at the sacrifice of the *Town Crier's* nocturnal masterpiece. Drawing a deep breath, Andrews advanced to battle.

"Mr. Woollcott, you and I are going to have the goddamndest battle ever staged in this studio."

"Are we?" Why? What's the trouble?"

"We've got to cut you out. Not a single word of your finale will hit the air."

To his unbelieving ears came the soft rejoinder: "Dear boy: you are the director. If you say it must be cut, it must be cut." Then turning to Ruth Gordon with an expansive gesture, he added, "What in the world ever makes people think I'm hard to get along with?"

"Whew!" said the director, mopping his brow. "Well, I long ago discovered that if you're going to have trouble with anyone, the best way is to tell him so, flat, and it won't happen."

His self-congratulation did not go so well with Aleck, who turned a glowering regard upon him.

"It worked this time, you so-and-so; but don't you ever try it again." And out he stamped without saying good-bye.

Silence followed, lasting a week. A friendly note was delivered at the studio, saying that Woollcott had discovered the voice of the century, and would Andrews please arrange for an immediate audition. Andrews did so.

The "voice" whom Aleck sent over was his barber!

Being Woollcott, he must still play the *gamin* at times. An imaginary dialogue between the *Town Crier* and his director circulated privately in the studio, to this general effect:

WOOLLCOTT: But I need a good story to brighten up the script. Don't you think so?

DIRECTOR: That depends on what you mean by "good."

WOOLLCOTT: Well, the one about the heroic doctor and the three Red Cross nurses.

DIRECTOR: Page the censor!

WOOLLCOTT: Would they stand for the Nuts and Bolts Convention one?

DIRECTOR: I'm afraid not

WOOLLCOTT: What about the Sunday-school superintendent who slept in the barn?

DIRECTOR: Not if it's the one I have in mind.

WOOLLCOTT: Oh, hell! I'll sing a hymn.

Only once was he shut off, and this was not in the studio but at a commercial banquet where he had not been warned, so he claimed, that he was on the air. His story of a restaurant road sign advertising "Mary's Place" was fairly raw even for a stag audience. The speaker was much amused when told that his high-spiced anecdote had penetrated to many a pure and unsullied American household. Yet he was horrified into a cold sweat at his narrow escape from reading over a nation-wide hookup the following preface:

"I am here to introduce the Hamilton College Choir, a group of forty-seven young Christers drawn from the undergraduate body."

He checked himself barely in time before the word "choristers," which, by the slurring of a vowel in the script, had become "Christers" to his startled eye.

His Cream of Wheat "serenades" caught on at once. He would pick some conspicuous personage, ascertain his or her favourite musical selection, give a character sketch of the subject, slightly varied from what he had previously published, and have a fine orchestra play the chosen number. Thus he celebrated a long list, ninety per cent of them his personal friends: Booth Tarkington, Jerome Kern, Helen Hayes, Alice Longworth, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Holmes, H. L. Mencken, Charles Chaplin, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Walt Disney, Willa Cather, Harpo Marx, Katharine Cornell, Laura Richards, Ed Wynn, and Irving Berlin.

Long before his Cream of Wheat contract expired, Alexander Woollcott was a valuable property on the air market. Julien Field, head of the programme department of CBS when Woollcott came there, and later his agent, cleverly exploited him not for breadth of appeal but for what, in advertising jargon, is known as "class." (Woollcott writhed at the term.) His connection with a product was supposed to give it a cachet of distinction; his name to be a sort of royal patent. He was identified with the loftier realms of trade. It was impossible to think of Alexander Woollcott descanting upon body odour or touting a cathartic pill. It was not the fantastic Broadway celebrity, but the dweller on intellectual and cultural heights, that Field offered for sale.



His pulling power was beyond question. When he sent out an appeal for cast-off spectacle rims, thirty-seven hundred crowded the mails. In the course of a broadcast he described a book of Gibson drawings that lay on the embroidery-covered table beneath the lamp in the Phalanx cottage, casting over it the nostalgic spell of his most homey voice and phrasing. Widely though he had advertised for a copy, he had never been able to get one. That night when he got home, one of the desired volumes was awaiting him. The morning mail brought promises of seven others.

This is a sort of power which no Crossley rating can evaluate.

Granger Pipe Tobacco bought the Woolcott name, fame, and salesmanship on a half-year schedule, thirteen weeks at \$3,000 a week, the second thirteen at \$3,500. The Town Crier was now unexcelled as a technician. He would take home his own records for intensive study. He could "tailor" a script to the exact period of delivery. Seldom did he make a mistake or have to repeat. Yet, astonishingly, he remained a student, with the student's willingness to learn. Let a magazine editor so much as touch a comma of the Woolcott manuscript, and the author bristled like the fretful porpentine; in the studio he was a wholly different person and, incidentally, much better liked. The CBS people have nothing but kindly memories of him, which is more than can be said of any periodical office with which he was associated.

For the tobacco programme Earle McGill was called in as director. Every working day the Town Crier would arrive with a sheaf of new ideas, which called for careful winnowing. He would present them hopefully one after another.

"What do you think of this?"

"It doesn't strike me as very funny."

"Well, if it isn't funny, I don't want it," the broadcaster would say ruefully. "Perhaps you'll like this one better."

"Isn't it a little on the broad side?"

"Oh, maybe it is!"

Then would follow an excellent idea which would be noted down for development. Seldom did the Woolcott temper flash, as when he proposed to point a joke with reference to a headlined scandal involving the scion of a great tobacco fortune.

"Do you think it's good taste to take a fall out of a competitor?" asked the director.

"Taste? Taste?" snapped Woolcott. "What do you expect of me? It's like asking a colour-blind man to match samples."

In the course of time he wearied of the studio grind. He complained of "the chronic panic of the radio station where, if a broadcaster be not on hand a full quarter-hour ahead of schedule, the men in charge collapse under a neurotic conviction that he has been run over by a truck." His industry flagged: his labour-saving propensities asserted themselves. Not content with re-using his material, he had recourse to padding, trusting to his elocutionary appeal to carry it off. It was a revival of his journalistic space-grabbing tricks. The radio public, by his theory, would swallow "the multiplication table if broadcast with sufficient emotion." Emotion was part of his stock-in-trade. He read superbly. If sometimes he indulged in hokum, it was delivered with infinite artistry.

By the convenient device of incorporating a poem, a historical pronouncement, or even a contemporary address, he saved himself hours of laborious writing. He had his half-hour to complete: if original ideas failed to materialize, there was always his scrapbook. Thus he thrilled his listeners with President Wilson's war message, King Edward's touching radio speech of abdication, the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and William Allen White's editorial on the death of his daughter Mary. His sponsors were less thrilled than the public. One of the tobacco company executives, after clocking the last-listed performance, which consumed more than three-fourths of the allotted period, complained, "If we want to pay thirty-five hundred a week for readings, why not get Clark Gable?"

*Variety's* radio department called Woolcott "a gabby guy" but gave him credit for specialized technical virtues on the air.

Broadcasting develops its own technique. It was inevitable that the practice of addressing viva voce a widely variegated audience should affect Woolcott's craftsmanship of the pen. Some critics objected to what they identified as "the mike influence" upon his later writings. Maclay Lyon set forth this view in the *Kansas City Star*, apropos of the selections gathered in *Long, Long Ago*:

Woolcott's style is definitely a speaking style, filled with the interpolations and cart-before-the-horse sentences that gave him a chance to play tricks with his voice on the radio—an effective microphone device but devilish reading.

Commercial sponsorship grated upon the Town Crier. It imposed limitations of which he became increasingly impatient. Those blithe insults which he had so lavishly dispensed in person and, to a lesser

degree, in print were interdicted on a medium which sought to make sales, not enemies. That he had garnered \$80,000 out of the air by 1936, with prospects of an increased earning capacity, did not weigh against his conviction that he was intellectually in the doldrums and getting nowhere. He thought regretfully of *The New Yorker*. He longed to get back to the broader licence of the printed word. He wrote a magazine piece about it, "Mr. Woolcott Is Off the Air," in the *Christian Century*. At the close of 1935, he confided to Katharine S. White his desire to resume the "Shouts and Murmurs":

I hereby resolve to spend 1936 in learning things, instead of shooting off my mouth, and in writing, if at all, only things I really have on my mind, or what is left of it.

He did not know himself. The spell of the air had gripped him. His New Year's resolution did not outlast its year. In November he was writing again to Mrs. White:

For better or for worse I am going back to the microphone as a drunkard to his bottle.

## 21

### "I HAVE HAD PLAYMATES, I HAVE HAD COMPANIONS"

"BRACKETT once abashed me," wrote Woolcott, "by saying I never really liked anyone whose life story would not make a good Profile for *The New Yorker*. There is enough truth in this to make me uncomfortable." F.P.A. presented the reverse side of the medal, judging that such friendships as Woolcott's "are first formed through admiration of work rather than the other way about."

That he did habitually use his friends as "copy" is undeniable. There is a creditable explanation. He found them so interesting that he could not forbear making his world of print and radio participants in the charm of their acquaintanceship. He admitted to "my immense frustration at being permanently barred" (for so-called medico-ethical reasons) from writing about his ward, Dr. Brode Jensen, for publica-

tion. Few, indeed, of his character sketches fail to leave the reader a feeling of quite personal warmth towards the subject depicted. Thus their author found in this usage-sanctioned process satisfaction as well as profit, since the subjects of these suave and witty jubilees were naturally full of appreciation.

The Woolcott circle of intimates was subject to change, precipitate and violent. Affronts, real or imagined—generally the latter—would fester in his soul overnight, and in the morning he would sentence the offender in terms that would befit a hanging judge. Mere differences of opinions, political or social, were enough to banish the culprit from the presence for ever, subject to reconsideration, as in the case of Lloyd Stryker, who incurred his host's ire by an encomium on the Russian imperial family. Woolcott expressed a hope that he might never again set eyes on his old friend and, a few weeks later, was cordially inviting him to Bomoseen.

Friendship with Woolcott was a fluctuant and parlous business. Now you were and now you weren't. He quarrelled with Marc Connelly and Howard Dietz, neither of whom held it against him. He alienated Brock Pemberton, and they never made it up. He split definitely with Herbert Swope, though towards the end the bitterness had abated on both sides. An unprovoked outbreak on Aleck's part so disgusted Robert Benchley that the humorist bade him "go away and stay away—and I mean it."

His association with Harold Ross partook of the nature of guerrilla warfare. Few of his women cronies escaped some breach of the peace at his hands. A debate with one of them developed a pitch of acrimony which culminated in the lady's hurling a Scotch highball, ice and glass included, into his angry face. It was not for lack of conscientious endeavour on Woolcott's part that his friendship with Booth Tarkington did not come to ruin over a political difference; against the novelist's imperturbable good humour, the younger man's savage thrusts were impotent. He so grossly insulted other guests of the Gerald Murphys' dinner table that he was incontinently banished from the house, but this rupture, also, was healed by as much of an apology as the offender could bring himself to offer: a large box of "very special" candy was delivered to Mrs. Murphy, without message, the next morning.

Did he ever repent these acrimonies? There is evidence in the affirmative, though he seldom apologized.

"It is nice to find again a misplaced friend," he wistfully wrote to a

former associate, alienated for years, who, learning that Aleck was ill, had made a friendly gesture.

For mingled poison and tragedy the breach between Aleck and Edna Ferber must be reckoned the most serious of his catastrophes in this field. There had been the inevitable bickerings which are bound to occur between two highly sensitized temperaments, but their mutual liking survived at least one severe test when the critic, writing of the production of *Minnick*, the dramatization of the Ferber novelette, "loosed vials of vitriol out of all proportion to the gentle little play's importance." Nevertheless, she could still enjoy, when it was applied to others, "just that degree of malignant poisoning that I always find so stimulating in the works of Mr. Woollcott."

As to the original offence, there are several versions, all unpleasant, one grossly so. Aleck, in a letter, hints that it had some connection with the thirty watches stolen from the Ross-Woollcott ménage,<sup>1</sup> a suggestion which strains the imagination. Whatever it was, it need not have been irremediable. Though Miss Ferber coined her epigram, "this New Jersey Nero who mistakes his pinafore for a toga," all might still have been composed between the former friends (for the wide word-of-mouth circulation gained by the phrase tickled Aleck's vanity) had not she, through no fault of her own, come an hour late to his play, *The Dark Tower*. Explanations were unavailing. Aleck's pride of artistry, ultra-touchy in all that concerned stage matters, was rasped.

"That settles it," said he. "I've wanted to break it off. Now I will."

But there was a real, though non-sentimental affection involved. He repented. He devised a method of reconciliation in the grand manner. He would review the forthcoming Ferber autobiography, *A Peculiar Treasure*, over the radio in such terms that all rancour would be eliminated from memory and they would proceed in amity for ever after.

Unhappily he did not like the book, wherein he differed from a large section of the reading public. He thought that it smelled of Elsa Maxwell, a distasteful odour in his nostrils. The Woollcott conscience was rigid in literary judgments. He could be violently prejudiced, but he was immovably honest. Neither for better nor worse did he mention the book through a public medium. There was no further hope of a rapprochement.

<sup>1</sup> This is the only indication that he ever thought of the watches after having left them with Harold

Pitfalls beset the path of the writer who makes "copy" out of his associates. While it cannot be successfully maintained that the Woolcott circle, as a type, was allergic to publicity, the kind of notice dispensed by him was not always to the subject's taste. So it befell with his admired friend, Kathleen Norris.

*Cosmopolitan*, in 1933, had featured a series of pen portraits by Woolcott. As a headliner in the same magazine's fiction list, Mrs. Norris was obviously a most suitable sitter for one of these amiable sketches. The result was a Woolcott masterpiece; her wit, her charm, her humanity, her good works, her unparalleled earnings were duly reported. The *Cosmopolitan* staff read it and approved editorially. Mrs. Norris read it and approved personally. Therefore the record is clear for Woolcott. It went into print and ructions followed.

In a chatty passage the magazine biographer had described an evening in Hoboken, whither he delighted to go for the purpose of sitting in the peanut gallery, applauding virtue and hissing vice in the true spirit of the Victorian age which Christopher Morley was bringing back to life in his *Old Rialto* and *Lyric* theatres with revivals of *The Black Crook*; *After Dark* or *Neither Maid, Wife nor Widow*; *The Blue and the Grey* or *War is Hell*; and other nineteenth-century hits. Several pals accompanied him on the occasion set forth in the article, among them Mrs. Norris.

Having a couple of hours to kill, they went to a neighbouring saloon and there played cribbage for stakes until curtain-time. To the casual eye this seems innocuous enough, but both the writer and (inexplicably) his subject were imperceptive, until too late for remedy, of the ominous consideration that a successful novelist, and particularly a successful woman novelist, does not belong to herself alone. She is a public figure, a literary property of dollars-and-cents value, and, like other market quotations, sensitive to the state of the public mind. In Mrs. Norris's case, her literary gifts are hardly more important than the fact, that, to her readers, she stands as a bulwark of the eternal proprieties. She is an exemplar, a guiding light, an arbiter in the department of morals comparable in authority to Emily Post in the department of manners. Her admirers expect her to be ever on the side of the angels.

And what kind of angel would be drinking and gaming in a waterfront beer cellar?

What the reader reaction to the Woolcott piece was is an editorial

secret. That it was large and unfavourable is a fair inference. Apparently forgetful of her O.K. to the article, Mrs. Norris complained sharply. Reminded, she responded angrily; one whom she thought a friend had shown gross lack of consideration. There was a rupture of a friendship which Aleck valued, but he could not see and would not admit that he was culpable. After a cooling-off period, the novelist made overtures. Aleck was painfully embarrassed. In a short time, he knew, the offensive article would reappear in all its hurtfulness between the covers of *While Rome Burns*.

It was too late for revision. Something might be done in exculpation, however. A hasty footnote was improvised. The visitors had, it was represented, entered the haunt of the liquor traffic but they did not buy a drink.

Aside from its limping quality as an excuse, the spectacle of a group of prosperous tourists occupying a table in a presumably busy refectory without spending a nickel might seem to a captious mind to indicate a certain callousness to the interests of the trade. How do they think saloons make a living?

The appeasement worked. Upon the final Woollcott appearance in San Francisco, he was introduced by Kathleen Norris.

By an ironic parallel, when Woollcott's own character was set forth in print he rent the welkin with his pain, though like Mrs. Norris he had, himself, okayed the article. He was running true to form, displaying, as Burnet Hershey had observed, "that curious characteristic which made him the most sensitive of human beings when he was the object of criticism or satire, and the most insensitive when he was doing the criticizing."

Nothing could be more typical of the fitful and precarious quality of the Woollcott associations than his friendship with Noel Coward. He had first met the actor, not yet a playwright, outside a Broadway theatre with Bea Kaufman. Woollcott perfunctorily asked the slender, pale youth his opinion of the play they had just seen.

"Teejus," languidly murmured the unknown.

Aleck was amused. It struck him as a happy characterization. Further acquaintance increased his liking for Coward. They corresponded voluminously. Coward inscribed a copy of his book "with my usual addled hero-worship." Gambling was a bond between them. Aleck considered Noel the only gamester of his acquaintance as ardent as himself. Long after he had dropped dramatic criticism he recalled hav-

ing known the actor-playwright "since he was a shabby youngster in his teens who either ate at the expense of some rich wage-slave like myself or didn't eat at all. It is part of the ritual of the American theatre that Old Uncle Woollcott should go down on these occasions (road openings) and hold his head during the tremors of a try-out."

For no apparent reason, Aleck decided that the friendship was one-sided; that "I know everything about Noel; he knows nothing about me. He is not even interested." His admiration for Coward's craftsmanship, dramatic power, and, later, patriotic service was undiminished. But, in the same letter in which he paid tribute, he could write, paraphrasing a famous line from *Private Lives*:

"There isn't a particle of you that I know, remember, or want."

No quarrel befell. It was no more than a parting of the ways by tacit and mutual consent. On the last of Coward's many visits to Bomoseen, both men were bored.

"I hope he never comes back," said Aleck to another house guest. "He talks me to death."

"Do you think perhaps he's failing?" asked Coward in the boat going back to the mainland. "He wants to talk *all* the time."

"After forty we lose friends and make only acquaintances," Mark Twain once said. Aleck was an exception. In middle age he acquired three comrades who, in different ways but all for the better, influenced the rest of his life. Of these George Backer was closest to him. Backer was not of the type which Aleck habitually found most congenial. He had no taste for the boisterous literacy of the Sophisticates. He was philosophical and reflective of temperament, addicted neither to games nor to wisecracks. The attraction by which he drew Aleck was that he thought along lines in which Aleck was interested but followed emotionally rather than intellectually, particularly in sociology.

Backer was a millionaire and a Socialist. Shallow minds, incompetent to conceive that a man's intellectual and social principles may take precedence over his material interests, call this type "parlour pinks." In that sense, Woollcott, too, was a parlour pink. Backer did not convert Woollcott, because Woollcott needed no conversion. Phalanstere principles were permanently effective in his political thinking. When Backer ran for Congress on the Socialist ticket, Woollcott gave time, voice, and money to his campaign. Later Backer published the *New York Evening Post*, and Woollcott interested himself, though not financially, in helping to guide that organ towards the left. Along political



and sociological lines, Backer was, to a great degree, his mentor, though believing that Woollcott fell short of any sound philosophic grasp of the problems.

Of a very different type was Thornton Wilder, whose novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* had made a sensational and wholly unexpected success, some little time before he and Aleck met. "Strange mixture of poet, prophet, hummingbird, and gadfly" is Aleck's characterization of him. If not precisely his friend's literary conscience, the novelist was at least his literary spur, without whose incitement *While Rome Burns* might never have been put together. Himself a worker of almost ferocious intensity, he quietly but persistently pressed upon Woollcott to increase his output and to do more permanent work. Personally he is the gentlest and most charitable of men. Aleck's violences and injustices made him wince. But though he never openly protested, such was his influence that, so their friends noticed, the Woollcott outbreaks were noticeably tempered in his presence. Though neither man was technically religious by bent, their companionship had, I think, more of a spiritual basis than any other association of Woollcott's later years.

"Courage is the only thing that makes me weep," Woollcott once wrote.

Edward Sheldon's indomitable spirit was what drew Woollcott to him, even more than the brilliant and outgoing mind in the helpless body. There was no other friendship in his long list of which Aleck was so proud.

Graduating from Harvard at twenty-one, Sheldon had already half finished a play, *Salvation Nell*, which, in the following year, scored a brilliant success on Broadway. He followed it up with other notable achievements—*The Nigger*, *Romance*, and *Lulu Belle*, the latter in collaboration with Charles MacArthur. Everything in life was his; he was rich; he was popular; he had position, both intellectual and social. At the height of his popularity he was stricken. Within a short time he had become the mere husk of a man, completely paralysed and totally blind. This death-in-life he maintained not with resignation, which is at best a pallid and negative virtue, but with an incredible, quiet gaiety and felicity of spirit. Until his death in 1946 he remained the valued adviser of playwrights and otherwriters, young and old. He was a notable conversationalist, and, by some inner divination, an unerring judge of character. There was a permanent list of people, many of them notables who waited to see him, and by no means from

pity, but because he had so much to give. Often one had to make an appointment two or three weeks in advance.

The acquaintanceship between Ned Sheldon and Aleck was slight and casual in the Broadway days. After the playwright was invalided, Aleck was taken to see him. It was an ordeal. Aleck suffered, and suffered the more in that he feared lest his perturbation should be noticeable to the sick man's keen perceptions. But Sheldon was "heavenly kind." Through his disability he had developed a peculiar tact: he made it easy for his caller.

Once the ice was broken Aleck was himself again. However busy he was, he never thereafter came to New York without going to see Sheldon. Sometimes he would take along for reading the manuscript of some play not yet produced; again, a book or article which had particularly interested him; or perhaps they would idly and gaily exchange personal gossip. When Aleck sent a recently graduated Hamilton man, D. G. Kennedy, to Sheldon with a note of introduction, he wrote to the lad, "I am paying you the greatest compliment in my power in sending you to Ned Sheldon."

Heaven only knows what torture of self-denial Aleck must have suffered in refraining from making a *New Yorker* Profile of his friend. He feared that Ned might not like it. Probably he would not have.

The one really affecting experience of my own, in the gathering of data for this biography, was hearing Ned Sheldon's voice quaver and seeing his effort at self-control when he tried to tell what Aleck's devotion had meant to him.

These are but prominent figures among many, for Alexander Woollcott possessed and enjoyed an unreckonably large circle, shifting in some degree, but, for the most part, steadfastly devoted to him. If the sceptical reader questions how this can be true of so cantankerous a curmudgeon as has been pictured in these pages, I can only plead that I have presented the character as he himself sedulously built it up. His friends knew him better. The egotistic side of Woollcott demanded deference, admiration, applause. Beneath that, there were concealed a hunger for affection and a readiness to respond to it in full measure. The false and often brassy front annoyed but did not deceive his friends.

His friendships fell rather clearly into two classes, those of tradition and those of selection. To have been a Woollcott playmate on Sash-curtain Row, classmate in Germantown or on College Hill, fellow cub on some late night newspaper grind, or buddy in sick-bay or front-

line trench, established an irrefragable claim. On tour he was quite capable of turning away the mayor of the city or the arbitress of the local Four Hundred; but if a visitor was announced who had appeared as Queen Mab in the far-away and unforgotten Kansas City days, "Wheel her in," said Aleck, pirating the laugh line from *The Butter and Egg Man*.

One example of this sentimentality of reminiscence will serve as typical. A specially stirring Woollcott broadcast (on the Cavalcade of America programme) was followed by a flood of congratulatory letters and telegrams. The broadcaster's sole acknowledgment was to a man who had not looked for a reply but had written just for old times' sake.

Frank Gale had been a cub reporter in Aleck's salad days on Newspaper Row. Together they had covered assignments and discussed the future of the business over soft drinks in *The Times* drugstore. Gale graduated from Park Row into accountancy. The two men drifted apart and in twenty years had not seen one another five times. Yet when the letter came from his old crony some obscure chord was touched in Aleck which vibrated to an indestructible emotion. Putting aside everything else, he sat down and wrote a long and warm letter, recalling the old association and regretting that their paths had diverged.

"Yet you are one I'd swear by always. . . . You have a unique place in my affections and will have as long as I live."

Since a man is known by the company he keeps, I have attempted to make a compilation of the Woollcott intimates, and an astonishingly heterogeneous roster it turns out to be. The grouping is an approximation, the count doubtless incomplete. Since his intimates waxed and waned according to proximity and circumstances, the lists, to be accurate, would need reshuffling, the names reapportioning for different periods.

One fact stands out: essentially difficult and superficially unreliable though he was in all relationships, heedlessly though he alienated those about him by offences ranging from petty churlishness to inexcusable truculence, the catalogue of permanent ruptures with those really close to him comprises but three entries, two men and one woman. So far as anyone knows, the cronies of his childhood, boyhood, and college days could, without exception, reckon upon his loyalty and, if need be, upon his service, at call.

Because they are elsewhere considered, I have omitted from my reckonings those women in whom he took a romantic interest. Three

other people are *hors concours* for the purposes of this chapter: Woollcott's joint heirs, Joseph Hennessey and Dr. Frode Jensen, and his brother, William, who to his mind was at the age of sixty-four "still the most charming man I know." These three were, in his own estimation, his family.

Beginning, then, with those who were bound to him in the liens of old association and traditional sentiment, the following names come out of the past of his childhood, youth, and early manhood, as having played a more or less vital role in his life:

George Smyser Agnew  
Albert A. Getman  
Robert Barnes Rudd  
Hawley Truax  
Alex F. Osborn  
Lloyd Paul Stryker

Lucy Drage  
Sophie Rosenberger  
Mrs. Alice H. Truax  
Alice Root Nichols  
Laura Root Gilbert

Next the comrades of his war and newspaper days:

Heywood Broun  
Harold W. Ross  
Alice Duer Miller  
Dorothy Parker  
Franklin P. Adams  
Edmund Devol  
Howard Dietz  
Harpo Marx  
Irving Berlin

Frank Sullivan  
Herbert Bayard Swope  
Robert Sherwood  
Edna Ferber  
Ruth Hale (Broun)  
Minnie Maddern Fiske  
Helen Hayes  
Alison Smith (Crouse)  
Kathleen Norris

Though some of them date from a little earlier, the following group belong properly to the period of his full-fledged celebrity:

George Backer  
Thornton Wilder  
Noel Coward  
Charles MacArthur  
Edward Sheldon  
Charles Lederer  
Paul Robeson  
Ben Hecht  
Booth Tarkington  
Paul Bonner  
Alfred Lunt

Felix Frankfurter  
Ethel Barrymore  
Lynn Fontanne  
Marie Belloc Lowndes  
Edna St. Vincent Millay  
Laura E. Richards  
Lady Colefax  
Anne Parrish  
Eleanor (Mrs. Theodore)  
Roosevelt  
Grace C. Root

The observant eye will note one feature of this inventory: the overwhelming predominance of "known" names. This must not be taken as indication that Aleck picked his friends out of *Who's Who*. It signifies merely that he was, by natural affiliation and sympathy, drawn to the kind of people who "do things."

Of the number cited above, the ten whom Aleck would probably have named as his most cherished cronies are (or were, since two of them predeceased him) George Backer, Thornton Wilder, Harpo Marx, Irving Berlin, Booth Tarkington, Robert Barnes Rudd, Albert A. Getman, Alice Duer Miller, Dorothy Parker, and Lucy Drage.

Invoking the reader's patience, I must make one more list, since it throws light from another angle upon the composite personality we are studying. The people who most patently influenced Alexander Woolcott were, in the order of their influence (of necessity more or less guesswork), George Backer, Thornton Wilder, Alice Duer Miller, Heywood Brown, Franklin P. Adams, and Booth Tarkington.

Alice Duer Miller remarked in a gathering at Bomoseen that she supposed she was Aleck's most intimate friend.

"Of course," she added, "there are nine hundred and ninety-nine others who feel the same way, and probably with just as good a claim."

This chapter and the estimate of Aleck as a friend would be incomplete without one more episode.

Walker McMartin, the "small, dour, silent" fraternity brother who had commanded Aleck's admiration in college by chewing tobacco and playing expert bridge, died at a time when Aleck's heart condition was serious. From Bomoseen to Johnstown, the McMartin home, is a hundred-mile trip. Over the protests of physicians and friends Aleck determined to attend and did attend, though "I usually avoid funerals, and there have never been any in our family."

"I am going if it kills me," he wrote, "and, indeed, I would go if I knew it would. I even think I know why. It would be phony and sentimental to pretend that Martie's death meant much or *anything* to me now, but to jog along just as if nothing had happened would somehow seem to dishonour an old and deep affection. If the mere passing of a third of a century can wipe Martie out of my heart, then all the affections which warm me to-day are mere steamer acquaintances."

The Woolcott sentimentalities may have a touch of the phony in cold print. The Woolcott loyalties were imbedded in his life.

## CHIP ON HIS SHOULDER.

ONE proof of Woolcott's innate vigour is that he never abated his zeal for a fight. In his mood he was the modern replica of the medieval ruffler, swaggering abroad with hat cocked and thumb in girdle, seeking the *casus belli* and, if it came not, baiting it with choice provocations. Like Sir Nigel, he loved a good bicker. Too often it was his friends whom he galled. Towards his enemies he was calmly indifferent after the first clash.

Something incurably cantankerous in his make-up incited him to these impartial affronts. At times it would seem that he had a grudge against the world, partly suppressed through his years of struggle but seething up in reasonless irritability as soon as he felt able to afford that luxury. "... His arrogance and venom," thought Edmund Wilson, "arose from the vulnerability of an excessively sensitive man rather badly favoured by nature and afflicted by glandular disorders."

Though he engendered, he did not secrete, personal rancour. In twenty years of association Booth Tarkington heard him speak of only three persons with actual dislike. Shortly before his death he told me that in all his life he had genuinely hated but two people. He spat his venom; he planted his dart; he forgot or ignored consequences.

The rumours of his wars were wafted abroad on gusts of publicity. What started as a private feud was presently in national circulation. Partly this was Woolcott luck (for he enjoyed it); partly that design for living in the limelight which he early worked out. Many of his insults, rooted in this principle, were strictly ersatz. Without warning, he would greet a guest with "Good evening, Mrs. Emptyhead," or "What! You here again, Brainless?" For no ascertainable reason except possibly an ill-digested breakfast, his welcome to a friend whom he had not seen for a year might be, "Your face revolts me, Repulsive. What about getting the hell out of here?" Such sallies were usually perpetrated before a crowd and were timed for effect upon the audience. Mr. Woolcott presents Mr. Woolcott as the Fabulous Monster.

That he attacked with peculiar vivacity and made enemies with singular facility is explicable, if not excusable, on the ground of his inability to measure the virulence of his own poison. I have known

him to express honest surprise when a grossly offensive letter was resented.

"What did I say to stir *him* up?" he asked wonderingly.

I pointed out that he had merely accused the recipient of bad faith, favour-currying, and abandonment of principle.

"That's your own lack of intelligence," said he witheringly. "I didn't mean it that way at all."

Nevertheless, he wrote a frank and honourable explanation. His pen had, in the first instance, run away with him. It often did. He was as prone to overwrite in private communications as in print: in fact, more so.

His rare apologies were apt to be irritant rather than emollient. As an example of what he considered the *amende honorable*, the following letter has its envenomed points:

Dear —:

I've tried by tender and conscientious nursing to keep my grudge against you alive, but I find it has died on me. In the matter of —, I still think that you were incredibly cruel in intention and a liar after the event; but it dawns on me a little late that, like most people I know, I, too, have been both cruel and dishonest at one time or another in my life. Anyway, what of it?

There follow a brace of gross insults, a hint of personal violence, a solicitous inquiry for the recipient's health which had been poor, and the signature,

Your former companion-in-arms, A. Woolcott.

He had suffered so much from the jeers of his fellows in college, as he told Howard Dietz, that he made it a principle always to hit before the other fellow. Encountering Edmund Wilson he growled, "You're getting very fat," obviously, comments Wilson, to forestall a comment upon his own corpulence. Gene Fowler's welcome to Bomoseen was the oft-used "Hello, Repulsive," followed by the commentary that "a low police reporter" was hardly the happiest choice for John Barrymore's biographer. Nevertheless, the future author of *Good-night, Sweet Prince* spotted it as a bluff, covering "as warm a heart as I ever encountered." In this diagnosis James M. Cain concurred, though with qualifications. Introduced to Will Woolcott, he said, "Your brother has a heart of gold"; then, swallowing hard, conscientiously added, "and how I hate the son-of-a-bitch!"

Total strangers, innocent of intentional offence, could rasp the thin-skinned author to snarling churlishness. An old lady in a Cleveland book store where Woollcott was on exhibit with other authors, asked him to autograph her copy of *While Rome Burns*, saying courteously:

"My daughter, to whom I am sending this, will appreciate it so much, Mr. Woollcott."

Aleck seized the book and inscribed it, "To an old bore," whereupon the recipient slammed it on the floor and stalked away.

At the close of the show a clerk brought around a book for signature.

"No," snorted Aleck. "It's bad enough having to pander to the customers without being held up by the hired help."

A week after the tour a publisher, making the rounds of the trade, "found the entire book departments of Halle Brothers in Cleveland and Marshall Field in Chicago seething with rage against him."

Yet this same bristling, offensive curmudgeon could interrupt a busy day to hunt (and find) an opening for a stagestruck young girl on no more valid a claim than that she was the niece of an Army nurse who had served with him at Savenay in the old, fondly remembered days of glamour and stench.

Business considerations never inhibited Aleck's rancour. Book reviewers are supposed to treat all publishers, even their own, alike. At least once Alexander Woollcott, L.H.D., then touching occasionally upon books in his *New Yorker* department, "Shouts and Murmurs," blackballed a prominent publisher. He had taken Random House sharply to task for what he declared an inept and unscholarly translation of Marcel Proust. Having met and talked with Proust in Paris, at the time of the World War, he felt a special interest in him, and a personal resentment against any maltreatment of his prose. In rebuttal, Frederick A. Blossom, the translator, published a letter in *The New Yorker*, pointing out that the critic's difficulties were not with his, Blossom's, English, but with Proust's French. Incensed, Woollcott indicated that, to him, Random House was as good as dead thenceforth.

Instead of remaining obligingly inert, the concern brought out a novel which Woollcott liked. He wrote to Bennett Cerf, head of the firm:

Dear Cerf:

By some miracle you have published a book which is not second rate.  
Please send me twelve copies at once.

Yours sincerely,  
A. Woollcott!



The reply was in the same spirit.

Dear Woollcott:

By some miracle you can buy those twelve copies at Brentano's.

Yours very truly,

Bennett Cerf.

Random House publications were thereafter permanently out so far as Woollcott the reviewer was concerned.

To one basic principle of journalistic ethics Woollcott was steadfast. He would not use the printed page as a weapon of personal spite. His tongue sufficed him in that department. While a guest at the Coffee House, he addressed Charles Hanson Towne, one of the club patriarchs, in terms so gross that that gentleman invited him to repeat them outside on the sidewalk. It would have been truly global warfare, since the clubman's rotundity was almost equal to his insulter's. Moreover, he was giving the other more than ten years' handicap.

Peaceable-minded members intervened. Nothing in the line of overt violence came of it. Some weeks later at The Players, a fellow member of Mr. Towne said: "Have you seen this week's *New Yorker*?"

"No."

"Alexander Woollcott pays his respects to you."

"Does he? I wonder where the skin comes off," said Towne, not much concerned one way or the other.

When he looked up the article he found the mention of him an anecdote not only inoffensive, but pleasant. Subsequently, Woollcott had occasion to refer to his challenger again. There was not a trace of venom. One may infer that, while the Sage of Bomoseen did not cherish any tenderer emotions towards Towne than before, he either respected him or the standards of honourable journalism or, what is probable, both.

Though a Woollcott editorial liaison typically began in close harmony and ended in Billingsgate, only once did open warfare result, and then with the one magazine towards which he felt a personified loyalty and affection, *The New Yorker*, "... the best editorial accomplishment that has taken place in this country in my lifetime," in his opinion.

His success in its pages had been built largely upon brief biographies of his friends. What little return in kind there had been was sketchy and laudatory. When, after the close of the "Shouts and Murmurs" series, *The New Yorker* decided to do a Profile series on him,

he was more than ready to collaborate by supplying all data at his command. The magazine's decision was not reached without considering its probable effect upon the subject. The project originated with Wolcott Gibbs who, since his trying experience as editorial go-between with Aleck, had been pressing Ross to let him do a character sketch of the office Gila monster. Ross thought it likely that the write-up would make trouble, but maybe it was worth risking. Gibbs produced a three-part opus and turned over to its subject for correction and suggestions. Aleck okayed it.<sup>1</sup>

"With certain reservations," he telegraphed Gibbs, "you have made me very happy."

There is some reason for believing that these reservations applied to an old and close friend of Aleck's whose identity was cloaked (in part, at least) under the pseudonym of Sergeant Quirt. This odd character in real life had graduated *summa cum fraude*, as one of his several victims put it, from a career of temporarily successful low finance, into a Federal penitentiary, as duly set forth in *The New Yorker* article; from there into Chicago journalism. Aleck pointed out the unfairness of imperilling "Quirt's" efforts to go straight, through publication of the article.

There is still current in Chicago newspaperdom a semi-apocryphal legend about it, with a flavour of that ruffianly classic, *The Front Page*, to the effect that *The New Yorker* wired the managing editor of the Chicago paper, asking whether knowledge of the fact that one of their reporters was an ex-convict would result in his discharge. The reply came back, "No: but which of the five do you mean?"

"Sergeant Quirt" remained in the sketch. There was a practical reason why the magazine did not wish to alienate Woolcott: he was planning to renew his editorial connection with it. A second letter to Gibbs resolved any misgivings:

Your qualms about my reception of what you describe as the unamiable part of it were baseless . . . I beg of you to believe that you can print this Profile just as it stands without making me feel bitter towards *The New Yorker* or any less tender towards Ross than I already feel.

He assured Thornton Wilder, who had read the first article and was concerned, that the Profile had not "afflicted" him in any degree.

<sup>1</sup> Among Woolcott's corrective notes to the article appears, "My name is Aleck, not Aleck."

He did, however, assert his opinion that the treatment accorded to the pseudonymous Quirt was "despicable," while disclaiming any special interest in him and asserting that there were eight hundred people who took precedence over him in his (Woollcott's) esteem.

The Profile, as published, seemed to many of Aleck's friends, including the present writer, to have emphasized his more grotesque and displeasing qualities, with too little recognition of his underlying character. This is the trend of the thumbnail-school biography. Woollcott had done far worse to others, as in his astringent article on Owen Wister. For what followed I attempt no explanation, since the magazine staff differ over the cause of wrath; I simply record the fact that Aleck was hurt and angered as never before in his life.<sup>1</sup> Indignant protests from his friends may well have contributed to his abrupt change of attitude. That he had been in the position of *The New Yorker* in the Kathleen Norris episode can hardly have occurred to him; otherwise he might have seen the other side. He wrote to Harold Ross:

To me you are no longer a faithless friend. To me you are dead. Hoping and believing I will soon be the same, I remain

Your quondam crony,  
A. Woollcott.

The plan for his return to the staff was abandoned. That productive co-ordination was ended for ever.

When it seemed probable to him, in 1941, that he had not long to live, Aleck wrote to Ross, making overtures for reconciliation. Ross was more than willing: he was both regretful and puzzled over the whole affair. A visit to Bomoseen was projected. The invalid's health took a turn for the better. It seemed he wasn't going to die, after all. Not for a time, anyway. The invitation was withdrawn. The two former comrades never saw one another again.

There is a faintly ludicrous corollary to the split. Loyalty to their friend impelled Alfred Lunt and his wife, Lynn Fontanne, to cancel their subscription to the weekly and ban it from their home. What was their shock, upon a visit to Bomoseen, to find the current issue on the table! Aleck was at first nonplussed by their perturbation. Then he grinned.

<sup>1</sup> Harold Ross thinks that it was injured pride over the exposure of his gullibility in the Minnie-and-Susan radio hoax, (See Chapter XXIV.)

"Why not?" he said airily. "I've never stopped having it sent.<sup>1</sup> I'm making some suggestions now about articles."

The rupture with Ross left scars. At that time Woollcott was fighting on another front an action which was pure, unadulterated joy of battle to his soul, if only because a national magazine spread the gory details before its millions of readers. In one of Philadelphia's suburbs there lives a millionaire patent-medicine man named Barnes, whose collection of Renoirs, Cézannes, Picassos, Matisse's, and other modern painters is without parallel west of the Atlantic. Though inhospitable to the general public, Dr. Barnes welcomes art students to his gallery, and maintains a ten-million-dollar fund for their training. He is a vigorous, humorous man in his sixties with a taste for polemics of the rough-and-tumble sort. If he has a weakness, it is that he is just a shade ostentatious in his contempt for Philadelphia's society and club folk, as well as of celebrities of any sort who might conceivably and erroneously feel themselves superior to a self-made specimen like himself. Carl W. McArdle, writing in *The Saturday Evening Post*, thinks him a frustrated artist and dual personality, "Scientist, art connoisseur, and educator, who in his dealings with the public is a combination of Peck's Bad Boy and Donald Duck." Locally he is regarded as a holy terror and has never taken any pains to ameliorate that impression. He and Woollcott had one point in common: neither shrank from publicity.

In the winter of 1939 Woollcott took a house in Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, where he entertained lavishly for three weeks. He knew all about Barnes, as Barnes knew all about him. Hence it was presumably with some motive other than expectation that he wrote the drug magnate, inviting himself to view the famous art collection. Barnes says that the communication was in the form of a telegram, collect; but that is merely his rampant sense of humour breaking out. His reply, through a supposititious secretary, was that Dr. Barnes was out on the lawn, singing to the birds, and must not be disturbed. So witty was the letter, in its writer's own informed opinion, that he could not resist telling the *Philadelphia Record* all about it, with the gratifying result of an editorial, "All Woollcott and a Yard Wider," exulting over the fact that the author had "been served a metaphorical bellyful."

<sup>1</sup> The earliest rough copy off the press had always been mailed, coverless, to Woollcott by special delivery. It continued so to be sent up to the day of his death.

This was the gage of battle, indeed. Woolcott's weapon was to hand. He knew Benedict Gimbel, Jr., President of the Pennsylvania Broadcasting Company, and sent word to ask him for the courtesies of the studios to make some recordings and also a broadcast. Mr. Gimbel put every facility at his disposal. Thus armed, the Town Crier wrote a carefully courteous letter to Barnes, explaining that his limit of visual endurance was six pictures a day, and that "whereas I quite understand the pardonable pride in your collection which has led you to besiege me with invitations to examine it," he regretfully found that time was lacking. Further, he hoped that the patron of art would not object to having the whole matter brought out in a radio interview next day.

This threw the thrasonical doctor off balance: he could do no better than challenge his opponent to produce any proof of having been invited to the gallery, through which opening he received another thrust:

"I am afraid it will be impossible for me to continue this correspondence . . . but I promise to come out and see the pictures the next time I pass this way." Assuming prematurely that he had the best of the bout, Barnes congratulated himself upon "trimming the fringe of your intellectual trousers, carried so high that your mental bottom was exposed to the public at large."

Nevertheless, an uneasy dissatisfaction with the outcome possessed his mind, for when Leonard Lyons devoted an item to the epistolary exchange in his syndicated column, "The Lyon's Den," Barnes poured out his soul in a letter denouncing Woolcott and enclosing a batch of clippings to support his cause. The subject of the clippings was mildly amused. He wrote to Lyons:

Dr. Albert Barnes is so easy to tease that it may seem hardly sporting to do it. All I had to do in Philadelphia was to keep promising that I would come out to see his pictures.

The last promise elicited nine letters from him. To test him for your own amusement, drop him a line saying that, although you received his communication, it was mistakenly carried off by the cleaning woman and you did not have time to read it. You could then assume that it included an invitation to visit his picture gallery and protest that your duties in New York would not allow you to avail yourself of the opportunity. You will thereupon get eighteen letters from him.

One important point of strategy in the toy warfare escaped the usually discerning Dr. Barnes. During the progress of the controversy,

Woolcott was making a stage appearance in Philadelphia. The Barnes publicity advertised it by columns of invaluable and unpurchasable space. The doughty doctor had been taken for a ride by one of the most expert and resourceful press agents in the theatrical world.

The vanquished warrior's services to the victor's play did not end there. They were transferred from the local to the national field when Barnes, still smarting, imparted his woes to McArdle for use in the latter's *Saturday Evening Post* character sketch, where the whole campaign was duly set forth. As the pseudo-Woolcott play was now running with three companies from coast to coast, authors and actors were appreciative of the stimulus to general interest afforded by publicity in a national magazine.

The McArdle-*Post* version of the set-to gave Dr. Barnes all the best of it. Did that satisfy the subject? Far from it. He took vehement exception to the Fontaine Fox-styled headline, "The Terrible-Tempered Dr. Barnes."

Having a subject of special local interest to exploit, the *Post* naturally plastered the fashionable Main Line, where Barnes lived, with advertising matter.

"Barnes got himself into his chauffeur-driven car," a member of the magazine staff describes the ensuing battle, "and went steaming from drugstore to drugstore, tearing down and taking away the display posters. Hot on his heels was another car filled with Curtis promotion men who would tear into the drugstore and put up new cards."

The doctor also issued a hastily prepared and highly spiced pamphlet in terms which might have been interpreted as provocative of libel action. If such was his hope, it was disappointed. The editors ignored his aspersions upon their product, but offered Woolcott space to reply in a pen portrait of the art-collecting medicine man. Aleck evinced no interest. Barnes, having served his purpose, was now squeezed dry. No more value in him.

"He isn't worth my time or your space," he told the *Post*.

Aleck's enduring friends—I use the term in its double sense—bore with him out of tolerance, compromise, or kindly understanding of a character that had its elements of tragedy. They realized that there was a deep-seated reason for these outbreaks; that he suffered from an inner exasperation, constantly if secretly inflamed by the ineluctable sense of his inadequacy. A relative reproached him for one of these lapses:

"What's wrong with you, Aleck, that you put people's backs up that way? You've got everything in life that you want."

"How in hell do you know what I want, when I don't know myself?" was the savage retort.

One of his oldest and fondest associates offers this theory to account for his sudden, unreasoning violations of the social amenities, amounting, at the worst, to breaches of decency and fairness.

Take the case of a person who suffers from, say, incurable and recurrent neuralgia. He goes along equably enough most of the time. Then comes a seizure of atrocious pain, and he lashes out at whatever object is nearest. Something of that condition existed in Aleck's psychological make-up. What it was, I would not undertake to say. But when it came upon him, he would struggle for self-control as long as he could. Then some petty occasion would set him off. It might be a contradiction to something he had said, or a distasteful political opinion, or nothing more than an inane remark that set off the explosion. All restraint was dissolved. For a time he would be a maniac, at large with a deadly weapon. When the paroxysm was over, he would return to normal. I doubt whether he was ever really remorseful for these outbreaks since he could find self-exculpation for them. The rupture of old friendships saddened him, though his pride would not let him admit it.

The wonder is that his facility in the gentle art of making enemies did not strew his path with more wreckage of friendships than actually marked it. On the credit side must be set the fact that those who knew him best held him in indestructible affection; yet the number of these to whom he had not given just cause for offence could be reckoned on the fingers of one hand.

Alice Duer Miller, between whom and Aleck there existed a mutual affection, uninterrupted in a quarter-century of intimate association, suggested a radio discussion between them on the topic of quarrels, "You advocating them as a means of clearing up inherent disagreements between friends, I disapproving of them on the ground that nothing worth quarrelling about could ever really be forgiven."

The design was never carried out. It might well have been a classic of the air.

## "GOD REST YE AND SEAGRAM'S"

Just a big dreamer with a sense of double entry  
—Harpo Marx on Alexander Woollcott

WHY Woollcott should have gone so prodigally commercial is a regretful mystery to his friends. Certainly he did not need the money. Allowed that his scale of living was luxurious and even extravagant, the fact remains that an income of twenty-odd thousand dollars a year affords a liberal margin to a bachelor who keeps neither a yacht, nor a stable, nor a chorus girl. Woollcott was not interested in any of these outlets to excess income. Moreover, twenty thousand was the minimum of his earnings as soon as he was well established. George T. Bye, his agent, estimates that for several years in the mid-thirties he must have varied around one hundred thousand.

"I am appalled at the magnitude of my bank account," he told Bye at that time.

Nevertheless, with more money than he knew what to do with, he put his name on the market in deals that were more than dubious. He had, as Heywood Broun (from whom Aleck would take anything) told him with a grin, lost his virginity to Muriel, the lady whom he so coyly apostrophized in the ten-cent-cigar testimonial; now, if he chose to go on the town, it was nobody's business but his own.

*The New Yorker* commented posthumously on these activities:

After almost a lifetime of maintaining his amateur standing as an enthusiast [he] suddenly turned pro and took money from a motor-car manufacturer, a whisky concern, and a maker of tennis rackets. "Why not?" he asked us indignantly when we uttered a mild protest. The answer is now what it was then: to accept pay for approving of something is to render one's opinion suspect. This is particularly bad in the case of writers and artists, whose opinions are valuable only if they are not for sale.

The Chrysler Airflow Car had made Woollcott an offer for an endorsement, which he accepted. *The New Yorker*, which was concurrently printing his series of "Shouts and Murmurs," expressed urbane editorial amusement:

The 1934 models have begun to bloom, and to our watery gaze they seem



more grotesque than ever. Last week that fabulous old motorist, Alexander Woolcott, who is admittedly the country's leading exponent of the flagging torso, came out publicly in praise of the new Airflow Chrysler because it carried him in vibrationless ease over a dirt road at sixty-five miles per hour while he made small notes on a scratch pad. A careful study of the photographic record of Mr. Woolcott's romantic interlude with Chrysler shows him slumped down in the rear seat, looking as if he had just been shot. This proves our point: that cars to-day are designed for hiding bodies in.

Mild though the commentary was, its subject felt that he had been wounded in the house of his friends, and, though he made no formal protest, complained outside the office of having been shabbily treated. To his own inner feeling of guilt may be attributed this over-sensitive-ness. Contemporaneously he refers to having gone to Detroit on a "faintly discreditable business prospect of my own." It may have been the distasteful publicity which kept him virtuous in this respect for nearly three years. When he fell from grace again, it was through liquor.

Seagram's Pedigree Whisky was the agency of his lapse. This time he safeguarded himself from unseemly display in the advertising columns by the form of his contract, which ceded to the distillers "full right and permission to use my name, my signature, and my letter head in a direct mail advertisement on Pedigree Whisky in the form of a letter to be written by me," but specifically interdicted its use in newspapers or magazines. An autographed picture was to go with the letter in a sales promotional campaign, addressed to a voluminous mailing list, supplied in part by the endorser of the product.

Aleck's friends were surprised and, in many cases, scandalized at receiving in their pre-holiday mail a facsimile letter from him:

If you are planning to give me a present this Christmas, I beg of you NOT to make it something indestructible which would only add to the litter of my life. The safest bet is whisky, and you could hardly do better than Seagram's Pedigree, that rare, eight-year-old Imported Bonded whisky of which Seagram's, and with good reason, are so proud.

But why, as they say in the drama, am I telling this to you? Well, it's because the Seagram people have seduced, bribed, and corrupted me into doing it. Besides, it happens to be true.

Here's hoping.

A. Woolcott.

An unexpected response came from Baltimore, where Brother Wil-

liam was living with his growing-up family of daughters: a valentine, with cupids and roses encircling this couplet:

Buy stocks on the margin if you must  
But don't trail the family name in dust.

"I don't know which of your little darlings did this," Aleck wrote to William, "but I'd like to break her goddam neck."

Doubtless he would have liked to break another neck, that of Eustace Tilley, a satisfaction denied him, as Mr. Tilley has no corporeal existence, being the legendary patron saint of *The New Yorker*. Eustace responded to the Seagram letter, regretting that the Christmas gift suggested therein was out of the question, as the Tilley present had already been purchased, a tippet lined with hand-picked burrs:

Well the holidays come and go [wrote Mr. Tilley publicly to Mr. Woollcott], yet this Christmas . . . thanks to your thoughtful note, has been given an unforgettable flavour, has become a season pervaded with the faint, exquisite perfume of well-rotted holly berries.

God rest ye and Seagram's merry,

Eustace Tilley.

In retort the whisky endorser wrote to Mr. Tilley defending himself, taunting *The New Yorker* with its liquor advertisements, and stating that he had received an avalanche of responses, at least half of them "inexplicably congratulatory." Before sending it in, he read it to Howard Dietz and Walter Duranty. Duranty approved; Dietz demurred.

"Why?" demanded the writer. "What's the matter with it?"

"It's undignified and it's phony," said Dietz.

Aleck flew into one of his best furies. Unmoved, Dietz added for good measure that his host (the occasion was a cocktail party at Aleck's apartment) ought to be ashamed to take money, which he did not need, for that sort of dicker. At this the vituperation reached such a pitch that the guest left.

Several weeks later he chanced upon an explanation. An old friend in sore straits had asked for a loan of a thousand dollars which Aleck, for some unexplained reason, did not have at his disposal.<sup>1</sup> In the same mail came the Seagram offer of twenty-five hundred dollars for the

<sup>1</sup> This was Aleck's subsequent version. In view of his earning capacity at this period, I find it difficult to believe that any shortage could have been more than extremely temporary. Moreover, his bank credit was good.

testimonial. It was too providential to resist. Aleck accepted, sent the thousand to his needy friend, contributed the fifteen-hundred-dollar residue to a favourite charity, and thus absolved his conscience. Nothing of this would he condescend to explain to Dietz. The estrangement, however, was of brief duration.

*The New Yorker* attack was interpreted by its victim as valuable publicity for Seagram's. He wrote to Cecil, Warwick & Cecil, the agents who handled the deal, suggesting that, as the whisky had benefited by all this unexpected advertising, gratis, an additional cheque would be in order. Would they pass the hint on to Seagram's? They would not and said so in unequivocal terms. The Woollcott temper flared. The Doctor of More Humane Letters composed one of his less humane letters, waspishly impugning the advertising agency's grammar, which might seem to be beside the point, even had the criticism been justified, which it was not.

His friend Alex Osborn, who as head of an advertising agency should know, is authority for the statement that Woollcott was now kept busy declining offers for his name and endorsement. He did not decline them all. His next name sales were respectively to a firm of tennis-racket makers and to the Pullman Company. From the latter he received five hundred dollars for the use of his photograph in display advertising, together with this message:

As one who puts in much of an otherwise misspent life going up and down America, I look forward to every night on a Pullman. Here is all the comfort any man is entitled to, plus the privacy . . . such blessed escape as lets him get his work done and his thoughts, if any, straightened out.

In one salient respect, this differed from his previous paid encomiums. It was honest. Woollcott did not smoke Muriel cigars. He did not prefer Pedigree Whisky to other brands. He had not played tennis in twenty years. He did not make notes at sixty-five miles per hour on Vermont's country roads, in a Chrysler Airflow or any other make of car—or, if he did, nobody could read them. But his liking for Pullmans was genuine.

"I find trains mysteriously restful and consoling," he had written to Osborn years earlier, "and, of course, infinitely prefer them to hotels."

A carefully prepared joke on the advertiser missed fire. He had assumed that the Pullman people hated the American Civil Liberties Union. So he arranged, as he supposed, for the \$500 cheque to be made

payable to that sturdy crusader for the rights of the underdog. A Pullman Company cheque to the Union would be almost worth framing for its walls. So, presumably, thought the company. It outsmarted its endorser by personal cheque of an official, made out not to the Union but to the middleman.

However debatable the ethics of testimonializing may be, there is no question but that Woollcott lost caste among his peers by these operations. Authors do, of course, give or sell their names to advertised products, as witness the magazine pages, billboards, and radio plugs. This species of commercialism is generally regarded, however, as refined bribery, best left to ballplayers, prizefighters, screen stars, and needy débutantes. How did Aleck regard it? The answer is to be found, I think, in his "faintly discreditable" reference, and his compounding with his conscience by turning most of the proceeds over to charity.

His attitude towards money was a peculiar exemplification of the double standard. He was generosity itself in disbursing it, but in acquiring it he was rapacious to the verge of sharp practice.

While he was dramatic arbiter of *Vanity Fair*, a young college graduate, Lois Long, was dramatic critic at a starting salary of \$35 a week. Every week she would carry her page to him for editing. He would O.K. it and, as soon as she left, call up the office and countermand parts of it. Later she would find some of her ideas embodied in separate articles. Being new and inexperienced, she made no protest, until she was called upon the editorial carpet and chided for never turning in any available suggestions. Then she indicated several articles as being based on her schemes.

"Not at all," was the reply. "Those all come from Mr. Woollcott."

Plucking up courage to face the important adviser, she entered a protest.

"I wish you'd tell Crownny [Frank Crowninshield, the editor] that some of those ideas were mine."

"You're on salary, aren't you?" said Woollcott.

"Yes."

"I'm getting fifty dollars apiece for usable ideas. You draw your money, anyway. What do you lose?"

She lost her job. Another offered on *The New Yorker*, where she conducted a department over the signature "Lipstick." Miss Long never had much love for her fellow staff member.

Contrast between this shabby treatment and his loyalty to his news-

paper subordinates will at once suggest itself. The distinction in Aleck's mind was presumptively this: Miss Long was not his choice for the position and he therefore owed nothing to her. Let her look out for herself!

Several digest magazines were in the field some years ago, competing for reprint rights. Through a secretarial error, one of the "Shouts and Murmurs" pages was sold to two of them simultaneously. Inspired with righteous wrath, the author called up Harold Ross.

"What kind of office are you running, Ross?"

"What's the matter now?" asked the editor wearily.

"You've sold one of my pieces twice."

"How do you know?"

"I got two cheques from different magazines in the same mail."

"What have you done about it?"

All the ire cooled out of the contributor's voice. "Went right around to the bank and deposited 'em," he chuckled.

Just before he was to have gone on the radio, on one occasion, the appearance was officially cancelled, due to some emergency. Woollcott demanded his cheque. He had prepared his talk; he was there, ready: it was no fault of his if the studio chose to cancel. It was quite apparent that he did not mean to leave the place without his pay. He got it in full, contrary to the custom of the trade.

For the movies he professed a lively contempt, but he had an equally lively appreciation of the Hollywood wage scale. If one might believe his repeated assertions, he acted for the screen only in violation of his higher nature. There was something "false and ugly in the very idea of a talkie." Excluding the Walt Disney and the Charlie Chaplin productions, there were less than half a dozen screen offerings that he considered worth seeing. As for participation in them:

"When I was a freshman at Hamilton," he told an inquiring dowerager at a London dinner party, "I was thrown into the college fount. In the early days of the last war, I had to take care of the bedpans in an Army hospital. But never, no never, have I been so humiliated as on my few appearances in the movies."

His Hollywood short, *Mr. Woollcott's Little Game*, which he wrote for himself, so afflicted his soul that he threatened to walk out on it, after declaring the original shooting the dullest and most exhausting day of his life. The lights and heat endangered his eyesight and probably his health! His director (directors, who are not endowed with

divine patience in addition to other noble qualities, either resign or commit suicide) put off the operation for another day. The star could hardly summon endurance to stick it out and draw his super-star pay of \$4,000 for three days' labour.

Mindful of his horrific reputation as the irrepressible *enfant terrible* of New York, Hollywood was shy of him. What assurance could a studio feel that if he came out on contract, he would not ruthlessly violate the divinity which hedges the tinsel kings of that realm? Apprehensive agents could visualize him in his character of pundit, correcting Sam Goldwyn's picturesque English or acknowledging the high honour of an introduction to local royalty by snarling, "Louis B. Mayer? Who's he? Never heard of him."

Better and safer to employ Mr. Woollcott cautiously and as occasion arose. One may guess that it was this very reluctance which brought such fancy prices. Hollywood proverbially wants what it cannot get. If Mr. Woollcott was prepared to "snoot" \$500 a day, it must be because he was worth \$1,000 a day. Such is the psychology of screen finance. Had a long-term contract been offered to him, he would probably have refused it; not that he loved money less but loathed Hollywood more. It may be observed that in this respect he was not unique or even peculiar. All writers hate Hollywood—or claim to.

At least one studio would have been justified in reciprocating Woollcott's dislike. Warner Brothers were the victims of his last deal with the movies, wherein he out-commercialized an expertly commercial trade. They had bought the picture rights to *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, of which the leading character was unmistakably modelled upon Alexander Woollcott. (Incidentally, he received \$12,175 for his share of the rights, as he owned a fractional part of the play.)

All should have been plain sailing now. As Woollcott had entered no protest against the stage presentment of the "libellous caricature," but, on the contrary, had "swallowed it with relish," it was a reasonable inference that he would accept the screen version in the same spirit. But the legal mind is circumspect, and the Hollywood legal mind ultra-cautious. Upon conclusion of the deal, a shrewd and far-sighted Warner lawyer spoke up:

"Have we a release from Mr. Woollcott?"

"Release? What for?" asked one of the partners.

"From claims of libel. You're hardly prepared to maintain that your character is not Woollcott, I take it."

No one else in the conference had considered that uncomfortable possibility. Very likely Woollcott himself had not considered it up to that time. When approached, he saw and grasped his happy opportunity. It may be that his annoyance at seeing Monty Woolley preferred to him for the star role had its influence. In any case, he gave the brothers an unpleasant surprise.

Release? Why, certainly. On his own terms.

They were stiff. The producers were obliged to stipulate that neither in their advertising nor their publicity would they seek to identify the leading character as Woollcott, and, in addition, to pay over a handsome sum of money. How much, they decline to state.

Had any motion-picture concern exercised upon him the pressure which he did not scruple to use against the Warners, how the echoes would have rung with his outcries of injury and wrath!

In the final reckoning it would not appear that the movies owe Alexander Woollcott one cent.

## 24

### ROUGHHOUSE ON THE AIR

EDITORS were, by this time, pretty generally inured to giving Alexander Woollcott a free hand—or else. On the air it was different. There he was up against an audience of self-appointed critics who were not in the least abashed by his prominence. To them he was simply another voice provided for their entertainment. When they were not amused, they said so with Queen Victorian directness.

Broadcasting is a highly personalized affair. The mail of a successful operator is large, intimate, and often acrimonious. Suave though his delivery was, Alexander Woollcott's method was provocative of repercussions, critical as well as favourable. He found himself involved in frequent controversies which, on the whole, he enjoyed, though the criticism sometimes irked him to the point of exasperated retort.

As a "class" feature, he appealed to the highest stratum of radio fandom, the intellectual upper ten. An error was gleefully pounced upon. If he mispronounced a word, perverted a quotation, or was

guilty of a slip in grammar, the morning's mail pointed out his offence in specific and uncomplimentary terms. He could be humble as when, in reply to an accusation that he had misquoted a famous quatrain of Edna St. Vincent Millay's, he confessed, "I ought to have been strangled in my cradle."

Or he could be haughty in his retort to a fellow writer, as when Laurence McKinney, a contributor of light verse to the magazines, fell foul of his pronouncing the name of William Rose Benét as if he were blood brother to Jack Benny. McKinney gave forth in verse to this effect:

"Contemplate" may be said that way,  
But I went to school with Bill Benét.  
And, also, you loquacious Cupid,  
I wish you would pronounce it "stupid."

Broadcaster Woolcott repeated the quatrain in his reply, without mentioning the authorship, and shrugged off the criticism.

"Surely nothing in the matter or manner of these broadcasts can have justified anyone in thinking I attach any importance to what is laughingly called correct usage, whatever that may be."

This was all very well had not the speaker presently set himself up as an arbiter of that same correct usage which he derided. He had earlier assumed the schoolmaster's chair in some of the *McCall's Magazine* articles. (Later he would do it all over again, slightly altered, in *The Reader's Digest*.) Here was the material, ready to hand, involving no more labour than a little brushing up. Soon his audience was to hear his impassioned pleas to respect the purity of the English tongue; to accord to the precious language of every day the same care which a tennis champion bestowed upon his racket.

The snipers opened up.

"None of them were prepared to maintain," said the pundit, in the course of a dissertation. Fourteen letters pointed out that "none" was not and could not be a plural; hence "none were" was ungrammatical. The unhappy locution "his insignia was" brought forth a sneering suggestion that Hamilton College's classical education might not be all that its affectionate alumnus claimed for it. A reference to the *New York Herald Tribune* elicited a score of challenges to the speaker's justification for accenting the last syllable.

He pronounced "dour" to rhyme with "sour" and complained bitterly that "forty thousand Scottishmen would know the reason why,



which is more fuss than the Cornish made over Trevelyan." He laboured under the conviction that the plural of gladiolus is gladiolas until a well-wisher tartly advised him to stick to his flowers of rhetoric and shun those of the garden. A slip of the tongue which betrayed him into perculate for percolate brought him a cheap and dogeared dictionary with the gratuitous suggestion that he spend five minutes a day on it. "Mrs. Patrick Campbell was her name," said the broadcaster, and several purists hastened to point out that it wasn't.

"The prefix, Mrs.," wrote one of them, "is the lady's title, not her name. Were you christened *Mister* Alexander Woollcott?"

Woollcott mentioned Tennyson's Arthurian classics as "iddles," and when Danton Walker, in his capacity as secretary, ventured to amend it with a long *i*, spent a furiously wasteful afternoon prowling through dictionaries, until he found an old one which gave an authorization of his version as an alternative.<sup>1</sup>

Unchastened by insistent censorship, Pundit Woollcott extended his pedagogy to the studio itself, and on one occasion, when President Benedict Gimbel, Jr., had extended the courtesy of his Philadelphia studio to him, volunteered five corrections to the station announcer's English.

Attacks upon his most vulnerable point, self-plagiarism, harassed him. Fans would write indignantly, "I've read that Berlin stuff at least twice in the magazines," or "That John Mulholland broadcast was all in *The New Yorker* a couple of years ago," or "How much do the Marx Brothers pay you for being their press agent, Woollcott?" Such complaints he simply ignored. For that matter, they were fewer than might have been expected, considering that his programme was rarely made up of original matter.

These radio performances took on the aspect of a paper chase, with the Town Crier as the hare, and a pack of hounds waiting in a wide, anonymous circle to pounce murderously upon the slightest slip. He became both sensitive and wary. Towards the close of the punditical series, it was a sharp listener who could catch him in so much as a

<sup>1</sup> Crosby Gaige suggests that he may have been influenced by the standard of his deeply-admired poetess-friend, Dorothy Parker, who wrote *Not so Deep as a Well* (Hamish Hamilton):

"Should Heaven send me any son,  
I hope he's not like Tennyson.  
I'd rather have him play a fiddle  
Than rise and bow and speak an idyll."

slurred syllable. He grew milder, too. The *World-Telegram*, remarking upon his return to the air in 1937, observed that from being "one of the most bitingly severe critics" he had been softened down by radio into "a sentimental, kindly old pal" and speculated as to what line he would take next.

Breakfast and fan mail came together for the *Town Crier*, and were attacked with equal avidity of appetite. Much of the correspondence was winnowed out in the studio, but it was understood that all appeals and requests were to be delivered to the principal for disposition. One such message, reaching him late in February 1935, stirred him to the depths by its simplicity and sincerity, and not less because of that element of mystery which never failed to excite him.

On the evidence of this and later records, Minnie and Susan, sisters and far along in years, eked out a miserable existence in a single tenement room somewhere north of Troy, N. Y. Only their sewing machine stood between them and destitution. Their environment was a slum, bordering a disused canal. Fuel they grubbed from refuse heaps. All their water must be carried by hand up the long, dark flights of stairs. Their light was from an electric fixture of the public-utility system which obligingly shone in at their window. While one sewed on piecework for a local shirt factory, the other recited passages from the Bible, in which they were well versed by childhood training. They had but one wish: to stay together until the end. After all these years of sisterly association, a sundering of the tie would be intolerable. Minnie was eighty-six; Susan, ten years younger. Both were ill and crippled with rheumatism.

Ninety-nine times out of one hundred that sort of letter ends in importunity, brazen or covert, for a small donation. This was the shining exception. Since no identification was possible, neither last name nor address being given, almsgiving was out of the question. The sisters wanted something quite different. Desperate as was their condition, one luxury remained to them, their radio, "a great blessing" since it brought to them the inspiration and comfort of the *Town Crier* broadcasts.

"Life is a little hard," the letter went on, "and this winter we have been so lonely and cold and were hungry at times. . . . Old age is so frightening when one is sick and alone. But we have each other. And we have real pleasant times in the evenings. I prop Minnie up in bed and, oh, Mr. Woolcott, I wish you could see her face when she hears

your voice. You see, you make it seem as though one of our own had come back to us through the long-ago years. . . . We are glad that you are young and strong and famous and have so many friends."

Would Mr. Woolcott read the Twenty-third Psalm to them over the air? "It would mean so much to Minnie. Perhaps your people would not like it. Young folks want to be gay. But we are so near the Valley of the Shadow. If you can ever do it we will whisper it with you, word for word. The Lord is my Shepherd."

The writer, signing merely "Susan," apologized for not giving their full names. They feared that it would be thought "very rude, but we are fearsome that the charities will find out about us. They might put us in a home—separate us. We shall be separated soon enough."

The whole letter breathed a spirit of fortitude and resignation. Against such an appeal the always impressionable Woolcott heart had no defence. Read them the Twenty-third Psalm? He would do it, though it cost him his contract. The Cream of Wheat officials made no objections; indeed, they were heartily sympathetic.

Accordingly their star artist appended to his message of the evening the following passage, a notable example of his special talent for sentimental stimulus:

There is something I must read because I have been asked to do so by one whom no one could refuse. The next two minutes of this programme are addressed solely to her. I do not know her name nor where she lives, and would not tell you if I knew. She is eighty-six years old and will not see again the childhood home towards which all her thoughts run on these long, cold winter nights. I wish I had some magic carpet on which she could be transported to that hill-top farm on the coast of Maine—near Belfast, it was—where she used to stand with the wind whipping the skirts of her chequered pinafore [the anachronism is Woolcott's, not the sisters'] and her hand shading her eyes while she looked out across the waters of Penobscot Bay, watching for the first glimpse of her father's sailing vessel coming down from Boston. I can almost see the shower of apple blossoms from the twisted trees behind the farmhouse. I can almost see the little girl herself, a shy, forgotten Rebecca of some unchronicled Sunnysbrook Farm. She asks me to read something to her to-night and promises that, lying in the frightening darkness, she will say the words with me as they leap the miles and miles which lie between us. Man and boy, I have worked ever since I was a kid and have, in my time, been given many and varied jobs to do, but none—I think you cannot doubt this—none in all my life I have been more earnestly anxious to do well. I can only try. I will try now.

From all accounts he was never more effective. He read with fervour, simplicity, and such authentic emotion that it communicated itself to his hearers. The response was impressive. Radio addicts flooded the CBS mail with offers of aid, with peremptory demands, some of them, that they be allowed to help.

The sisters kept silence for a month. Then came a second letter, this one signed "Susan Lovice Staples," which might have indicated abandonment of anonymity had there been any address. Again there was an apology for secrecy, explaining "... dear Mr. Woolcott, we wouldn't let you see us, so bent and twisted and soiled." The letter began: "Dear Friend and Gentle Heart," and went on:

You can never know the help and comfort you have been to us. . . . Oh if you could only have been in our little room that February evening when your kind voice spoke. The Lord is my Shepherd. . . . It seemed as though you had taken our feeble old hands into your strong young ones and were showing us the way home to Mother, Father, and the boys. Dear Mr. Woolcott, you brought a little bit of heaven to us that winter night. . . . We could hardly believe you were talking to us. For of course we realize you know so many accomplished, scholarly ladies and gentlemen.

The sustaining message had come barely in time. Minnie was dead of weakness and privation.

Further family details in the letter developed the background, though not definitively. There was a deep-sea father, lost in a gale with his two older sons. A third brother, "dear little Justin" had "gone wrong," though the loyal sisters were persuaded that he never meant any harm. Grief and shame had killed their mother. The old house on the hill must be sold, together with the Indian shawls, the gold breastpins, the family silver, etc. ("Sea captains' daughters always had nice things.") The impoverished spinsters drifted to New York State, to live their starveling life on the meagre wage of the shirt factory. The Town Crier carried copies of the letters in his pocket and read them emotionally to his friends.

"The finest tribute ever paid me," he declared.

He did not take it out in emotion. His philanthropic and his detective instincts both clamoured for action. Inquiry in the collar-and-shirt districts, set afoot after the earlier letter, had been fruitless. Maine might yield a better return. Woolcott sent an emissary to Belfast who scrutinized tombstones, investigated records, and interviewed Oldest Living Inhabitants. No such names as Staples or Lovice came to light.

There was neither record nor memory of a lost sea captain who left children named Minnie, Susan, and Justin.

It was bewildering, infuriating. The tender-hearted broadcaster could not rid himself of an intolerably affecting picture: the aged spinster alone in the tenement room, too proud for charity, certainly in dire want, quite possibly starving, and so waiting for death. There had been a hint of finality, of farewell, at the close of the Staples letter, with its assurance that the two sisters would be loving him in heaven, "just as we loved you on this earth. God bless you, my dear boy—my dear boy."

With the Cream of Wheat officials warmly concurring and only waiting to dig generously into their own private pockets, an appeal over the radio was formulated. The Town Crier called upon Susan to reveal herself. Let her look upon him as her lost brother, eager to help her. Her secrecy would be respected. All that he asked—and with him many friends unknown to her—was to give her comfort and security, put her beyond the fear of want for the rest of her life. Minnie was dead; there was no longer the question of separating them: would she not write him on his promise that her privacy should be respected?

No reply. Susan, as a baffled studio official remarked, had crawled into obscurity and pulled the obscurity in after her.

The final chapter was written several months later. Susan, too, was dead: had died happily in the very act of listening to the Town Crier. One who signed herself "Nurse O'Brien," otherwise unidentified, wrote in very bad typescript:

"When it got time for you to talk she asked me to raise her up in bed and put her sister's Bible in her hand. I turned the dial and Mother of God pretty soon if you didn't begin to talk to her. I wish you could have seen her little wasted face when you called her your sister. It looked like a light had been lit and was shining through her eyes and skin. She stretched out both her arms like she was taking hold of your hands. . . . Once she called your name and blessed you and once she said something about some still water. She died at just eleven o'clock."

There was a reference to Father O'Reily and an enclosure: an old-fashioned gold-mounted locket enclosing a strand of Susan's mother's hair.

For most people this would have ended the matter. Not for Alexander Woolcott. His sleuthing instincts were rampant. Furthermore,

he was not convinced by the "Obrien" letter. It seemed to him quite possible that Susan, having learned of the efforts to trace her, had taken fright and, with her delicacy up in arms at the impending threat of charity, had promulgated the mortuary letter with a view to checking the investigation. He sent his business manager and general factotum, Joseph Hennessey, to Troy with instructions to stay there until he had uncovered something definite.

Clues were not lacking. The three postmarks were all in the Troy region, one being Watervliet, the other two, Albany. The Obrien missive also came from Albany. The epistolary style of the sisters was convincing; the letter paper cheap and ruled; the spelling not impeccable; the handwriting of the rounded type taught in the 'sixties and 'seventies. The locket, too, was authentically in period.

The local indications, carefully indefinite though the writers had been, offered some help. The tenement, as described, stood beside the old canal bed. It was without modern heating, illumination,<sup>1</sup> or plumbing. The electric-light bulb outside might be identifiable. It was not much to go on, but it was something. Hennessey proved himself a patient and careful investigator. He skirted both banks of the abandoned waterway throughout the region. The scope of his inquiry was conveniently limited by the fact that very few tenements in the district were so ancient as to be wholly devoid of conveniences. None of these had a public-utility light shining into an upper room. Nobody in any of the rookeries could identify two aged spinsters as tenants. The name Susan Lovice Staples drew a blank.

Next, the investigator took up the death of Susan. All was equally dark here. No Nurse Obrien was registered in the district. No Father O'Reily was known in the diocese. Mortuary records failed to show the death of Susan Lovice Staples or any other seventy-six-year-old spinster, on or about November 24, nor did an exhaustive canvass of local undertakers yield any results.

Now, all deaths in New York State are reportable. Bodies must be duly certified for burial. The inference was inevitable. Susan had not been buried. Presumptively, then, she had not died.

Neither had Minnie! Parallel inquiry into the matter of her decease

<sup>1</sup> William Lynch Vallée points out that a radio-wise sleuth would have observed a discrepancy; as the aged sisters had no electric outlets there could hardly have been any result other than silence when Nurse Obrien "turned the dial." Battery sets, never cheap to operate, were, he says, out in 1935; and "crystal sets," which require no connections, do not have dials.

drew another blank. No person who could by any stretch be made to fit the measure of an eighty-six-year-old maiden lady from a canal-bank tenement appeared in the vital statistics at the time of her supposed demise.

On the strength of this impressive array of negations, Hennessey suggested fraud and chicanery to his principal. Woollcott was indignant. He would not listen to such heresy. The letters were indubitably genuine. Look at the handwriting. The locket was authentic beyond doubt. Was it conceivable that anyone would perpetrate so laborious a hoax for no ascertainable reason? If hoax it were, the practical joker would be sure to reveal himself presently to reap the enjoyment of his coup. He, Woollcott, would gladly lay a heavy bet that no such revelation would be made. He would have won the bet.

Once and once only, so far as the record shows, did he admit to a doubt. It was obvious that if malign inventiveness had been at work, it must have been fathered by some person or persons with (1) a grudge against Woollcott; (2) literary ability of no mean order; (3) a sense of "period"; (4) a habitat in the Albany-Troy region. The radio-author-critic had plenty of enemies, well or ill earned, but none of them, so far as he knew, lived in that region. The other three requirements were fulfilled by Harold W. Thompson, who had been a freshman when Woollcott was a senior at Hamilton. Dr. Thompson was a scholar, an antiquarian, the author of several books, and a resident of Albany, being on the faculty of the N. Y. State College. No grudge existed, to the best of Woollcott's knowledge. Still, you never can tell. He could not be expected to keep in mind all the people who imagined themselves injured by him.

To nobody else did he confide his suspicions. But at Thompson's quarter-century reunion, the former senior detached himself from a group of his friends, crossed to the class of 1912, and addressed Thompson with the classic freedom of the campus.

"Well, you plushy pedant, your little jest has cost me just about a thousand dollars."

Quite genuinely astonished, Thompson replied, "I haven't a notion what you're talking about."

"You did it," growled Woollcott. "Nobody else could have done it. A low, Slimmer trick." ("Slimer" is the opprobrious Hamilton epithet applied by an upperclassman to a freshman.)

The accused repeated his denial and mildly suggested that maybe

the 1909 man might like to buy him a drink and elucidate. Woollcott snorted and withdrew. Some months later he brought up the matter after a trustee meeting, and told Thompson the whole story. Thompson replied with some feeling that if he were concocting a joke on Woollcott it would not be at the expense of his best quality, but of some less admirable characteristic. Whether his denial was accepted, he never knew, though the pair parted on good terms.

One feature of this, the most elaborate and skilful fake in radio annals, which eluded Sleuth Woollcott but would undoubtedly have been noted by his detective idol, Sherlock Holmes (though Dr. Watson would, of course, obligingly have missed it), was the date of the Minnie and Susan letter displaying the family picture in all its detailed and archaic perfectionism.

It was April 1.

While always preferring the picturesque to the factual, Woollcott, so far as I know, never deliberately faked his writings. *Litera scripta manet*, he used to quote, with the commentary that he never was sure whether to take it as an author's boast or a lawyer's warning. Though often careless in his articles and negligent in verifying their basis, notably when pursuing one or another of his enthusiasms, he stopped short of deliberately perverting facts. On the air—where the spoken word does *not* endure—he allowed himself greater latitude. At least once he took flagrant liberties with history.

One of the most effective of his international broadcasts was on John Howard Payne and his "Home, Sweet Home." He delivered it in England and repeated it, in slightly modified form, in this country. The theme is that the song was the sole salvage from a tragically unsuccessful opera, Payne's *Clari, or the Maid of Milan*. According to Woollcott, the work was "a resounding flop" when produced in London early in the nineteenth century. It had to be so represented in order to support the Woollcott thesis that the medium for the best-loved song in the English language was a hopeless failure. The opera, asserted the broadcaster, "was given for twelve performances and never mentioned again. The disappointed Payne . . . asked only that [it] be mercifully forgotten. But you never can tell. *The show itself was forgotten, but one part of it was not,*" etc., etc. (The italics are mine.)

It was most appealing; far more so than the much less pathetic facts. The failure was an invention of the Woollcott imagination running



wild. While *Clari* did not do well in London at first, it crossed the ocean to a long and brilliant career. Presented in New York and Philadelphia in 1823, it scored a success in Washington in the following year, was revived in 1826, returned to London for a profitable run, held the American boards in 1828 and '29, and continued in sporadic revivals until 1854. *Clari* may not have been any *Abie's Irish Rose*; on the other hand, thirty-one years of stage existence is not precisely "a resounding flop."

Ignorance or carelessness on Aleck's part is not the explanation for this performance. He knew the record, and, when I was making some research into the origins of popular songs of the past, had written me an outline of the stage course of the Payne opera, only a few months before the broadcast which astonished me the more. In this instance, his urge towards the dramatic and striking overcame his literary conscience. Truth, unadorned, would have made a dull presentation, and dullness to Aleck was a worse offence than inaccuracy. So he did not attempt to adorn Truth; he simply tossed her out the window.

It was not his human critics that drove the Town Crier temporarily from the air, but a steamboat. This was at the close of his tobacco contract. The Liggett & Myers Company stood ready to renew, and Woollcott, though again weary of the routine, might possibly have acceded but for the mischance of a bursitis which took him to Doctors Hospital for an operation. The pain was severe; the sufferer would have been justified in calling off the broadcast. But, notwithstanding his pulpy physique, he was tough of inner fibre. Stoically determined to carry out his commitments, he arranged for the broadcast to be delivered from his room overlooking the East River. A few fellow patients, elderly ladies, were invited in: to be at his best, Woollcott must always have an immediate and visible audience.

Against the handicaps of non-professional surroundings and physical pangs, he was turning in a good performance, when, as his delivery was at its blandest and most seductive phase, a brazen-throated tug-boat, butting its way through Hell Gate rapids, punctuated the artful periods with derisive toots:

"Whoo-oo-ool Hoo-hoo! Whut-wut-wut-wut-hooooooo!"

Woollcott turned red, then purple, then white with helpless wrath. He could picture his audience, captives of his voice, twisting in mirth over the sacrilegious interpolations. To his physical agony was added mental anguish. By sheer fortitude he carried through to the end, then

lay back and delivered himself of sentiments, weak in vocality but so forceful in purport that his lady guests went scurrying from the room. He was through, *through*, THROUGH, so help him God! with this accursed and tricky business of the air waves. Oh, he might deliver an occasional broadcast for some cause in which he was interested. But as for a contractual series, never again!

He liked radio; of course he liked radio. But not for anything would he tie himself up again to a commercial sponsor. Hopefully he offered himself to Columbia at a greatly lowered rate if they would give him a regular hour established by contract and permit him to choose his own subjects without censorship. Acceptance of such an agreement with so outspoken a person as Woolcott would be the prelude to infinite and unpredictable trouble: Columbia refused.

Within a year he was back before the microphone with the Hamilton College Choir. Commercialism beckoned. He put on three shows for the Texaco Company and switched to the Magic Key programme, again with the Hamilton Choir plus Orson Welles. All this was casual. Half of his self-promise was abjured: to forswear sponsorship; he was holding to the other half and abstaining from commitment to a long series. Cream of Wheat broke down his resolution with an offer he could not afford to refuse.

In his earlier employment as "an air-shillaber for a breakfast food" (*Variety's* tart appellation) he had so fervidly touted the product that the theatrical weekly's authoritative radio column considered it "overdone from an ad-spiel viewpoint." Rehired, he was less docile. He became alarmingly polemic in expressing his opinions on international questions. The sponsors objected. Their purpose in employing Mr. Woolcott, they pointed out, was to sell Cream of Wheat, not to offend prospective customers belonging to various racial groups. Woolcott persisted in denouncing Fascism and Nazism with increasing heat, until the company put the issue squarely before him: either drop all matter of a controversial nature or terminate the series. (As this was long previous to our entry into the war, the protest was, of course, commercially valid.)

The Town Crier argued the point with candour and good humour. His sallies, he claimed, stimulated interest. He doubted whether they alienated customers. Anyway, if he were compelled to watch his step every minute, all the life would be sapped out of his broadcasts and they would cease to attract people. From the first, he had built himself

up by freely reporting his likes and dislikes of books, plays, manners, and customs. How could he "with self-respect agree in advance never to take pot-shots at such targets as Hitler or Mussolini, or, for that matter, at any other bully, lyncher, or jingo whose head happened to come within shooting distance?" It couldn't be done. Not, at least, by theirs sincerely, A. Woollcott.

Only one end to the debate was possible. The series closed. Woollcott surmised, composedly enough, that, as all the good time on the air was pre-empted by the national advertisers, none of whom was likely to be more liberal than Cream of Wheat, it would probably mean that "I must drop out of national broadcasting altogether, which, as you know, would be a solution entirely acceptable<sup>6</sup> to me. I would merely be driven back to the comparative privacy of the printed page where, in my opinion, I belong and where, at long last, I might get some writing done."

He could not refrain from taking one of his pot-shots at his sponsor. The occasion was a "capacity" lecture of his in San Francisco: the subject, freedom of speech. When he came to radio, he began, "As some of you may know, I have recently been broadcasting in the interests of a breakfast food whose name for the moment escapes me."

When the laughter died down, he paid his respects to the anonymous cereal company for what he termed their restrictions upon the right of free opinion. Later he had a change of heart. He was fair enough to admit that controversial matter was out of place on a commercial programme. But the split between him and the cereal company was never healed.

Early in his career when radio seemed his most profitable, possibly his only profitable, future, when he was most enamoured of the microphone, he unhesitatingly imperilled that future by going out of his way to express a courageous and fiery opinion on a question full of sectional dynamite. In 1931 there was a lynching on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Edmund Duffy, cartoonist of the *Baltimore Sun*, made it the subject of a memorable drawing. The negro's figure dangled blackly against the skyline; the caption, terrible in its simplicity, its scorn, its humiliation, was "Maryland, my Maryland!" So great was the demand for it that special proofs were run off, one of which Will Woollcott sent to Aleck.

The *Town Crier*, stirred to his depths, used the cartoon in his next broadcast, as the basis for a withering blast at the lynchers, and, to

make matters worse for the popularity-seeking radio, at the powerful American Legion, which, appealed to in advance by the Governor of the state to protect the jail, refused to lift a finger in defence of law and order. The protest of the radio concern, thus unwillingly made responsible for the high-explosive ideas of their broadcaster, moved him not at all. The bitter denunciations and threats of the "nigger-haters" delighted his soul. He had drawn blood. Two years later another opening offered and he took a second crack at the Legion, which, he surmised, was still safe in bed with the blanket pulled over its pallid face.

Attacks upon organizations and individuals, under commercial sponsorship, he was finally persuaded, were out of order. Surely, though, there could be no objection to speaking a kindly word, now and again, for a worthy object. This he did while exploiting a national product which had experienced labour troubles and was neurotically addicted to seeing the spectre of Communism in every shadow. The Town Crier's known liberal tendencies kept their nerves taut. CBS's smoothest diplomat was often at call to iron out misunderstandings and allay suspicions. A *modus vivendi* had been, so he supposed, reached. He came back from a trip, during which he had missed one broadcast, and called upon the vice-president of the sponsoring concern to assure him that all was well. He found that official bristling.

"Did you hear that blankety-blank Woolcott last night?"

The diplomat confessed that he hadn't.

"Then you don't know what he did. On *our* time, *our* broadcast, paid for with *our* money, he"—the voice rose to a modified yell—"he gave a boost to the *Civil Liberties Union!*"

## 25

### "I AM SIR ORACLE"

BUSIER men than Alexander Woolcott there may have been in the New York of the 'thirties; it would have been difficult to find them in his own hard-worked profession. His industry was prodigious. When one considers the achievements of his middle age merely from

the viewpoint of bulk production, those resources of literary thrift are explicable whereby he so brashly repeated himself in print, on the platform, and over the air waves. Author, lecturer, playwright, actor, after-dinner speaker, broadcaster, motion-picture monologist, Readers Club arbiter, publisher in a small way, silent partner in theatrical and screen enterprises, innkeeper, and testimonial salesman, he pursued his whims and tracked down the vagrant dollar with equally relentless purpose.

Never had he worked so unsparingly. Up at seven in the morning and often hard at it until midnight ("God knows why!"), he took on a new vigour in his mid-forties under the aegis, which he freely translated "lash," of his literary agent, George T. Bye, who had taken over the survivors of *The World's* famous "op. ed. page," dubbed, with a degree of exaggeration, "the dollar-a-word bunch": Heywood Broun, F.P.A., Deems Taylor, and Woollcott.

Woollcott wrote with absolute concentration at high speed, and with less alteration and correction than any other writer of equal virtuosity I have ever known. One may be sure that he had himself in mind in the following passage:

Most authors are difficult if not impossible. Many of them can no more rewrite a paragraph than you can pour back into the saucepan the nut-full fudge which has cooled and hardened on your wind-swept window ledge. Whenever a publisher hints to one of these that a change in this or that sentence might improve a newly poured script, the outraged scribe at once behaves as if someone had suggested brightening up the Twenty-third Psalm.

In the face of a presumption so naïve and incredible, it is natural to wonder how he can have failed to observe at their writing such laborious and self-critical artists as his intimate friends, Dorothy Parker, Booth Tarkington, or Thornton Wilder.

Yet, though the Woollcott practice may seem casual, almost careless, the results were generally happy; the finished product, which appeared to be generated so effortlessly, was expertly constructed, uniformly readable, and often brilliant. This was due largely to his prodigious if not always reliable memory, which enabled him to hold all his data in solution ready for use; partly to his newspaper regimen when he must work under the imminence of the deadline. Every secretary ever employed by him comments upon his unsparing industry. All his secretaries, by the way, liked and admired him, another proof that the

nearer one got to Alexander Woollcott, the less important his foibles appeared, the more essential to his personality the basic qualities of "punctiliousness and dependability, the honesty, sound character and fine mind that underlie an apparently flippant and frothy exterior," as Danton Walker puts it. If at times he was "petty, irascible, and unreasonable . . . it is because he sets a standard for himself and expects everyone else to live up to it."

No volume appeared over his name between 1929 and 1934. The dreary conviction had forced itself upon him that "I might as well face the fact that I never have written anything and never will write anything that will live after me." He was still the "chronic winner of second prizes."

Thornton Wilder, whose work and personality Aleck admired equally, entered a heated dissent. He must do another book. The labour would amount to little. There was material and to spare in his *New Yorker* and other available magazine contributions; it would be merely a matter of selection.

"He came up to Bomoseen and sat on my fat neck until I gave in," Aleck complained.

The result was a collection so various that its compiler could find no title for it and publicly invited suggestions. Ellen Scully, a New York City woman unknown in literary circles, hit upon the felicitous *While Rome Burns*.

The volume got off to a quick start, ran through the nation, spread to Canada, Australia, England, and the Continent, and sold in all 450,000 copies. The second-prize winner had become a first-prize winner. Critics joined in an all but unanimous paean of praise. Stanley Walker, in an enthusiastic *Herald Tribune* review, hailed the mellifuously fiddling Nero as ". . . as nearly as anyone can be said to be at this writing, the First Citizen of New York." William Bolitho had earlier proclaimed him "the very type of civilized man." *The New Yorker* analysed the book's success as due to Woollcott's "gossipy humour and flirtatious speech" and opined that his unique contribution to contemporary life was his "peculiar ability to infect one and all with the notion that they were at some sort of play or masque."

By no means the most favourable opinion, but inferentially the best-informed, appeared on the Woollcott page of *McCall's Magazine*:

It's a grab-bag full of (to put it mildly) twice-told tales—tragic, comic, senti-

mental, what you will. In its moonlit pages, ghosts tread a witless rigadon, and the clamorous wounds of a slaughtered harlot cry aloud across the years for vengeance. From a passing hansom, the author's goddaughter—a rigorous young woman of eight—peers out snootily at a procession which included (with a decent interval between them) such diverse characters as the most desired courtesan of Paris and Mr. Newton D. Baker of Cleveland. . . . I wish I could convincingly add that *While Rome Burns* combines the homely charm of *Little Women* with the pulsing excitement of the *Hound of the Baskervilles*, the sturdy humour of *Huckleberry Finn* with the more engaging qualities of *David Copperfield*. But, in this sceptical era, I fear you would question my impartiality as soon as you discovered that I wrote *While Rome Burns* myself.

With the book's publication, its author attained his highest status in the world of letters. Through skilful and patient showmanship he had theretofore established himself as a personage, whether distinguished or notorious depending upon one's viewpoint or prejudice; but his literary repute had been both ephemeral and circumscribed. At last, here was Woolcott, in bulk; take him or leave him. The public took him with acclaim.

How far the best-seller lists are a criterion of merit is debatable. The Woolcott collection of random pieces was more than a best seller; it marked the emergence of a form new to the period: the smooth art of the raconteur-essayist: a sort of twentieth-century *Colloquia*. Professor Charles Copeland, of Harvard, had given the formula:

Wherever we encounter the typical essayist, he is found to be a tatler, a spectator, a Rambler, a Lounger, and, in the best sense, a citizen of the world.

No student of the redoubtable "Copey," though a warm admirer, our author might have modelled his collection upon the professor's pattern. Thornton Wilder had been right in insisting that his friend had a message for America. To claim that the message was vital or important, in the larger sense, would be extravagant. It fulfilled a more amiable function. It gave pleasure to hundreds of thousands of readers.

That, within his limitations, Woolcott is a stylist is undeniable. He can be as nostalgic as wood smoke on a frosty morning. He is infinitely artful in the contriving of that literary device so ineptly employed by many imitators of O. Henry, the "snapper" that ends a narrative. Sometimes a line of his sings, as of the dead actor, Moissi: "I know not who is heir to all his dreams." He speaks with Emerson's "sad lucidity of soul," in the nobly sincere letter in which he views his own character

as it would appear "when the sentries we all post to warn us that the world is looking . . . no longer do their duty." Many of his characterizations, sentimental and other, would be hard to better: witness the double-barrelled description of Vermont and its favourite son, Calvin Coolidge, "small, lean, and crabbed; frugal, and addicted to old ways"; of Mrs. Patrick Campbell, in her desperately resentful decline, "a sinking ship firing upon her rescuers"; of the genus of diplomats, "babies in silk hats playing with dynamite," of his beloved college, "small, fond, and a little smug"; of the "amazing boy," the unfulfilled poet, Duncan Saunders, "this extraordinary mixture of horse sense and divine elation . . . there was a song in him somewhere and a little stardust still on his shoulders"; and Aleck's wistful reflection that having no child, he had missed "the sense of the eternal miracle of the world's renewal" which parenthood would have brought to him. In his later work, the thumb-nail introductions to his selections are models of compact and luminous composition.

But, to the mind of this reader (and admirer), the prime virtue of Alexander Woollcott's method lies in its informing personality and pervasive friendliness. He is not pointing a pen at you and narrating at long range something that may or may not interest you. He is talking to you confidentially about friends of his—fascinating people, distinguished people: you ought to know them—passing on to you a good story that he picked up in some unlikely place; making you free of intimate childhood or college or war or professional experiences; this with a cherubic confidence that you will enjoy hearing them as much as he enjoys telling them. All his method is pointed to this end of making the public his confidant.

The Woollcott ideal is expressed in a letter to President Hutchins of Chicago, complimenting him upon his skill of authorship:

"Your pieces sound like you, creating by the printed word the illusion that you are actually present and speaking. That is all a writer can ask."

He had the newspaperman's sensitiveness to what would catch the general reader. People are sentimental; he gave them sentiment to the verge of bathos and sometimes beyond it. People love dogs. There was always a dog in the Woollcott memorabilia. People thrill to ghosts, mysteries, murders, crimes; Woollcott can wallow in blood until the sanguine hue tinges his ink. The public is interested in prominent personalities. Woollcott deals lavishly and intimately with them, nearly



always in the first and second person, and this without pretence or exaggeration, for he knew them, as likely as not, by their first names. His is not the callow pretentiousness of the elbow-rubbing type of reporter who gloats in his column over the proximity of the glittering great. When he tells you wryly that he will feel like a fool at the entrance gate of heaven if Saint Peter happens to remember his refusing a dime to a needy beggar on the same evening when he paid for the dinner of the richest girl in the world, you know that he is dealing in fact. What he said to Bernard Shaw or H. G. Wells said to him, or he wrote to Justice Holmes, or wired to Helen Keller, rings true because it is true. Snobbery of one kind or another is innate in most of us. Woollcott's writings appeal to that as to other susceptibilities. The curious part is that he does not write about people like a snob, but simply and unaffectedly.

Much of his matter is gossamer-light, but so amiably set forth, with such balmy smoothness and so radiant a faith in the reader's enjoyment, that it persuades one's engrossed attention where weightier matters might fail of it. If he slops over into sentimentality, it is a fault readily condoned by the vast majority of his cult (one may safely conjecture them to be women), however painful to the judicious.

Criticism on this point touched him on the raw, for he knew himself vulnerable. He took vehement exception to an editorial in the *Omaha World Herald*, "The Woollcott Menace," which charged him with a sissifying influence in his book-review broadcasts. In rebuttal he cited his endorsement of such robust works as *Paths of Glory*, *Life with Father*, *North to the Orient*, *Mrs. Astor's Horse*, *Valiant Is the Word for Carrie*, and *I Write as I Please*. Could these, he challenged, be listed as "pink publications for pale people"?

Fervour was both his virtue and his vice. Only under self-induced emotional pressure could he produce his best effects. He lived in the superlative degree. Everything was *in extremis*, whether for praise or blame. Of all the nicknames whereby his correspondents addressed him, the late John H. Finley's was the most apt, "My dear Stentor."

Woollcott's judgments tended to the super-oracular. It was not enough to extol Paul Robeson's voice; he must record "the indisputable fact that he is the finest musical instrument wrought by nature in our time." Joseph Alsop he exalts into lonely grandeur as "the only young American I have ever met who is truly educated." The King of England's abdication address was "the most moving speech ever made

on the radio." Lizzie Borden, a pretty dull and sordid murderess when all is said and done, is, to Woolcott's mind, "America's most interesting woman," and the saga of her axe "on the plane with Shakespeare and Sophocles." *Wuthering Heights* is arbitrarily declared "the most enthralling love story in the English language"; Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, "the finest novel in a century"; *A Doctor of the Old School*, "the most moving and uplifting tale ever told in the English language," and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, "head and shoulders above anything ever written for our [American] stage."

Extolling John V. A. Weaver's vivid colloquial poems, "In American," he chose for comparison not Burns or Villon but Wordsworth and Keats, finding in his friend their American counterpart! Newton D. Baker is credited with having "the best prose style of any living American," though Justice Holmes at the age of ninety "still wrote better than anybody else in this country," and "no mere author has a better English style than that jolly medico, Dr. Logan Clendenning."

Our zealous critic unqualifiedly nominates Charlie Chaplin as "the greatest living actor," and Walt Disney's *Dumbo* as "the best achievement yet reached in the Seven Arts since the first white man landed on this continent." Willa Cather is, as by patent royal, "the foremost American author"; *The Thin Man*, on the same authority, "the best detective story ever written," notwithstanding that *The Lodger* is "the greatest murder story in the English language"; Elizabeth Bennet is "the most charming heroine in English fiction," and Oscar Wilde's *Reading Goal*, "the best ballad in English literature," while, to go to the other extreme, *Life and Lillian Gish* is adjudged to be "in a quaint way the most sickening book of our time."

He looks upon the bronze figure above the grave of Mrs. Henry Adams in Washington and pronounces it "the most beautiful thing fashioned by the hand of man on this continent." When he quotes a medical acquaintance, the man becomes without reservation "the greatest of living doctors," and his friend Eckstein's *Canary* is "as important a book in its field as any that has appeared since Audubon."

Nora Waln's little daughter wrote him a letter of protest against one of his comments about China, which inspired him to ecstasies of appreciation. It was a pleasantly mature note, precocious in its phrasing, but it hardly suggested that here was another Marjorie Fleming or "Young Visiter." Nevertheless, its enraptured recipient confidently prophesied that it would be included in all the future anthologies of

English literature. This was a decade ago. It has not yet made its appearance in those media.

Friends reckless enough to challenge his *obiter dicta* risked the loss of his favour. When he was still no more than the little-known critic of *The New York Times*, he asked Murdock Pemberton's opinion of Minnie Maddern Fiske whom Aleck had already extolled to the status of "the unchallenged Empress of the contemporary stage."

"I think she's a ham," answered Pemberton.

The colloquy took place as they were crossing Sixth Avenue. With a snort of rage, Aleck turned on his heel and, abandoning his usual timorous pace in traffic, dashed back to the curb which they had just quitted, accompanied by a chorus of grinding brakes and cursing taxi-drivers. He declined to recognize Pemberton's existence when next they met.

Later, when Aleck's ire had cooled, Pemberton brought him a play upon which he had been working. The critic delivered his judgment.

"You need education. Read good playwrights. Read Henry Arthur Jones."

"Which of his plays?"

"All of 'em."

When they met again Aleck asked his friend, "What did you think of the Jones plays?"

"Phooey!" replied Pemberton, employing the technical language of the higher dramatic criticism.

"You're a low ignoramus," said Aleck loftily, "I can't think why I ever associated with you."

This time the estrangement lasted three months.

All this tumult and shouting served a purpose: it beguiled the generality of his readers. Because he saw everything so magnified, so irradiated, Woollcott was able to communicate his self-hypnosis to his public, which not only accepted him as a mentor, but wept or cheered with him over his extremest ecstasies. So artfully were his overstatements set forth that they seldom palled or cheapened. He was that rare example of virtuosity, a soloist on the bass drum.

"When Aleck found something he liked," says Marc Connelly, "he seldom qualified his enthusiasm. He not only liked it; he loved it. And with the ardour of his affection dominating him completely, he occasionally—like all wholehearted lovers—did things which seemed absurd to less stimulated people."

The keyword here is "stimulated." His was the authentic *furor scribendi*. Only its sincerity saved it. In the heat of composition he believed everything he said. Later he might have his doubts. But later he was doing something else equally fervent.

Inevitably these fervours led him into embarrassments. A sally into journalistic knight-errantry roused his ancient Broadway haunts to derisive mirth. "The Truth About Jessica Dermott," the sprightliest of the *Cosmopolitan* portraits and a title of singular inaccuracy, was not a case of deliberate fakery like the "Home, Sweet Home" radio talk. Here Aleck believed what he wrote because he so ardently wished to believe, and in that faith he ignored all evidence to the contrary of his theme.

Jessica Dermott was the real name of Maxine Elliott. As *The Times* dramatic critic, Woollcott had a slight, backstage acquaintance with her, which he renewed when, a millionaire matriarch, she was reigning autocratically in her Château de l'Horizon at Juan les Pins on the Côte d'Azur, and entertaining royalties and celebrities. In his biography *Morgan, the Magnificent*, John K. Winkler, a contemporary of Woollcott's on Newspaper Row, had written:

Another close woman friend was Maxine Elliott. The rare brunette beauty of this young actress had taken New York by storm. Though born in Maine, her languorous charms were tropical. People followed her on the street and in stores. . . . In her pallid face beamed soft, melancholy eyes heavy with an indefinable expression of voluptuous sadness and passionate ennui; her mouth, with its disdainful curves, protested, by the living warmth of its burning crimson, against the tranquil pallor of her cheeks, and the curves of her neck presented those pure and beautiful outlines now to be found only in statues.

Morgan was interested in statues. But he was more interested in Maxine Elliott. . . . She was often seen with Morgan and more than once met the financier's friend, the Prince of Wales, afterwards Edward VII. . . .

Maxine Elliott had a peculiar influence over Morgan. She never hesitated to break lances with him. . . . Time and again Morgan permitted her to "tame" him—as he permitted all those whom he really loved.

By what arts of persuasion the ageing and retired actress beguiled Woollcott's ingenuousness will never be known. Fired with the spirit of chivalry, he devoted his pen to the defence of her reputation against the slanderer, whom he slightly dubs "Master Winkler." First he examines the legend that J. Pierpont Morgan built the Maxine Elliott Theatre, and discards it, wherein he may be correct. Members of the

actress's family believe that there was no Morgan money in the establishment, that the error was allowed to go uncontradicted because it was "good publicity." But it was when he passed on to a consideration of the association between the actress and the magnate that the defender protruded his knightly neck.

"... it is not true," he proclaimed. "I do not mean merely that it is not quite true. It is not true in any degree. . . . She did not know him at all. It was not merely that they did not exchange favours. They did not even exchange words . . . were not even acquaintances."

As to this, Vincent Sheean may be cited as a reliable witness, since he married Maxine Elliott's niece, and was for some time in the position of host at the Elliott chateau. In his personal reminiscence book, *Between the Thunder and the Sun*, he writes:

I once asked her if she had ever known the German Emperor.

"Mmm, yes; I met him once," she said indifferently, "on Mr. Morgan's yacht at Kiel. A very rude man."

For further evidence, had he troubled to pursue what he dismissed as "the Morgan myth," Woollcott might have found in "Master" Winkler's possession a snapshot of two far-from-mythical figures in shoulder-to-shoulder juxtaposition at the rail of a docking ship.

The prestige of *While Rome Burns* conferred upon its author a patent of the higher literacy. Both in the *McCall's* book pages and on The Early Bookworm broadcasts, he had played the part of pundit, telling his docile pupils what they should read. He had expounded; now he would select. The doctor would compound the bolus which he had prescribed.

It took the form of *The Woollcott Reader*, which was so warmly received that it was presently followed by *Woollcott's Second Reader*. Had the compiler lived there would have been a *Woollcott's Third Reader* and quite probably further sequelae. The two collections occasioned controversy, which is good for sales; they did not enhance the reputation won by *While Rome Burns*.

The editors of the *Woollcott Letters* term the two *Readers* "evangelistic." The definition is precise. As a less literate commentator put it, the Professor was not asking 'em; he was telling 'em; not this-is-what-you-will-like, but this-is-what-you-ought-to-like. His ingenious and often seductive prefaces indicate plainly that he laid upon himself the solemn duty of salvaging from oblivion masterpieces unrecognized by

hoi polloi. His own tastes he describes as "incurably miscellaneous." "By-paths in the Realm of Gold," he terms his selections, and prefaces the first with the explanation that

... the collection seeks merely the more modest and to me more congenial task of bringing together certain shorter flights of the imagination which have a way of getting out of print or are seldom found in the bookshops.

The result is a series of antitheses so violent as to be startling. Our *arbiter literarum* shuttles between the lachrymose sentimentalism of "A Doctor of the Old School" and the brilliantly cynical study of a particularly unsavoury pimp, *A Handful of Dust*, of which a disgusted reviewer wrote that it was "not only caviar to the general, but limburger to the particular." One may suspect that personal friendship influenced his choice; his associates are liberally represented, some of them by excerpts which seem hardly to justify themselves on a basis of judicial estimate. One omission is striking. Though fiction was born of and has ever since been mainly concerned with the reciprocal attraction of the sexes, not a love story is included, unless the flirtatious badinage of "The Dolly Dialogues" be so interpreted. In his literary preferences he was insensitive to the sex motif, a reflex, presumptively, of his own stunted powers. Sentimental he was about friends, dogs, places, childhood associations, heroes, and memories; romance in the more intense degree was omitted from his library as from his life.

Friends and critics, who had been all but unanimous in their approval of his earlier work, were both dubious and divided over later developments. Danton Walker relegated him to the Mauve Decade: "... he is irrevocably stamped with its tastes, its ideals in art and its scintillations ... but there is this maddening thing about the man—he is a master of English writing, and can weave these ancient wheezes into such a spell of words that one not only does not resent such chicanery but, in his own language, clasps the threadbare anecdotes to his bosom and treasures them for what they are—literature." Howard Dietz, whose sobriquet of Louisa M. Woollcott had firmly attached itself to the victim in Broadway usage, thought him "irremediably Victorian." John Chamberlain, of *The Times*, deemed him "at his worst ... something of an intellectual crooner." Lewis Gannett, with generous appreciation of his better qualities, identified him as "the sob-sister's boo-hoo brother" in his mushier moments. Gilbert Seldes deplored the fact that

"he seems to get most excited and most persuasive over the trivial and the second rate."

It would be interesting to know his critical judgment of himself. Presumably it would be fluctuant. But I doubt that the "chronic winner of second prizes" erred on the side of exaggerated self-esteem or that he would ever have advanced himself as a candidate for literary immortality. If he was interested at all in the perpetuation of his fame to posterity, it was a passive ambition. He showed his indifference when, in the late 'thirties, Max Herzberg wrote, asking permission to include some Woollcott examples in an anthology of American literature. A refusal came back from Woollcott's agent; Mr. Woollcott was not interested. Herzberg protested in reply that since Mr. Woollcott was, himself, a confirmed anthologist, it was illogical not to say ungracious that he should abjure that medium for his own works. Permission was received by return mail.

How far he was qualified to judge and select reading matter for others is suggested by the books he kept for his companions. The assortment which lined the shelves at Bomoseen, and which he willed to Hamilton College, while it certainly does not comprise the full scope of his reading, does present evidence of rather startling lacunae. David H. Beetle, discussing it in *Harper's*, writes:

"In general the collection doesn't seem so much like a library as it does an assortment of books that happened to get together."

Galsworthy, Hardy, Conrad, Meredith, Balzac, Hugo, Henry James, Wells, and Bennett are unrepresented, as are Chaucer, Emerson, Addison, and Steele. Of Shakespeare there is only *Henry IV*. There is, of course, much Dickens and a respectable showing of Kipling and Shaw; a smattering of Stevenson and less Thackeray. The classics are represented scantily by the *Odyssey* and a *Beowulf*, the latter presumptively a reminiscence of Woollcott's high-school days under Duncan Spaeth. Modern novels are scarce; *Arrowsmith*, Beetle notes, "has a lonesome look."

Following a discussion with Murdock Pemberton on literary standards, Dr. Woollcott offered to compose a list of the twelve best books in the English tongue. The list has been lost, but Pemberton recalls such singular juxtapositions as Zimmern's *The Greek Commonwealth* with *The Little Minister*, *Green Mansions* with *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Memoirs of a Midget* with *Margaret Ogilvie*.

The classic poets are conspicuously absent from the Woollcott



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library. Indeed, Woolcott was almost as insensitive to poetry as to the passion which inspires most of it, and doubtless for much the same reason. The great poems left him cold; he frankly regretted his incapacity for emotional or aesthetic response to them. For years his vote in versification went to Dorothy Parker's neat couplet:

Men seldom make passes  
At girls who wear glasses

It was supplanted in his esteem by another choice which also suggests that, for him, brevity is the soul of poetic wit: Sarah Cleghorn's:

The golf links lie so near the mill  
That almost every day,  
The labouring children can look out  
And see the men at play.

"Was ever more said in fewer words?" he fervently queried his radio hearers. "Did ever a mild and quiet quatrain have a more searing quality?"

Indisputably each selection has its own merit. Equally without doubt, the judge is running true to that form which inspired him to bracket the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" with "Oh, How I Hate to Get up in the Morning!" His other preferences, Henley's "Invictus," Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Kipling's "If," can hardly be rated in the highest class of poesy. Receptive as Woolcott's mind was to lesser stimuli, so far as any perceptible influence upon it goes, Milton, Wordsworth, the Shakespeare of the Sonnets, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Poe might as well never have lived. On the credit side must be set his praise for the lovely, aching quatrain to the Western Wind whose authorship is lost in the mists of the fifteenth century.

To the responsibilities of a mentor, he now added the function of a volunteer censor. In the department of literary ethics, his conscience was keen, and his expression of principles unsparing. He was on terms of intimate friendship with Archibald MacLeish, Librarian of Congress; between them it was "Dear Ambrose" and "Dear Ilex" (the pun presumably on the *lucis a non lucendo* principle, as Aleck hardly suggested the sturdy oak), which did not exempt the official from a typical Woolcottian rebuke. The occasion was a somewhat overblown press release, announcing the appointment of Alexander Woolcott to an honorary committee to select a fiction library for White House reading, to be called "The President's Shelf." "Dear Ilex" blew up.

"You tell me," he wrote the offending MacLeish, "to 'feel free' to say anything that occurs to me. It occurs to me to say that the announcement is either stupid or dishonest and I don't happen to know which or why."

He had never, he pointed out, received such an appointment and wouldn't have accepted if he had. The most that was asked of him was to "nominate a shelf of detective literature for the President's use," and he objected to having that simple effort magnified into an official function. The press item was cancelled and a less pretentious and more accurate form substituted.

Kenneth Roberts was one of Woollcott's admirations. He had enthusiastically "boosted" two earlier books, *Arundel* and *Rabble in Arms*, but he did not like *Oliver Wiswell*, the novel which presents the Revolution from the Tory viewpoint. He recognized the literary propriety of such a version, but when the publishers essayed to exploit the work as authentic history, he cut loose with both hands. To Nelson Doubleday, head of the firm, he entered a hot protest against the advertisements in which "... that curious piece of fiction was blandly presented by your publishing house as the long suppressed historical truth which was 'banned' from our text-books. Of course, you and I know that this is—if I may reach for the *mot juste*—horse dung." Historically, the letter writer proceeds, "it is about as faithful a *history* of the Revolution as would be an account of the last eight years in the White House written by Alice Longworth. You were right and lucky to publish *Oliver Wiswell*, but for your firm to adopt and endorse the viewpoint of its protagonist in your effort to sell copies of the book strikes me as nothing short of degraded and shameful."

Whether or not because of the Woollcott diatribe, the dubious claims were dropped from the advertising.

Although *While Rome Burns* promoted its author to instant eminence in the book world, he considered that he had not yet actually written a book. The nearest approximations, the volumes on Mrs. Fiske and Irving Berlin, were hardly more than sketches, subjected to the deft excisions of a blue pencil and assembled with a paste pot. His other works were mere collected journalism. His ambition ran higher. In the immense press of work generated by radio, movie, and lecture engagements, the book plan lagged but was unforgotten. In 1937 he was ready.

To Percy Waxman, who came to Bomoscen scouting for *Cosmopoli-*

*tan* articles, he explained that for the time being he would be engrossed in more serious work. On what subject, the magazine man asked.

"Poodles," said Woolcott

Waxman tried not to look dubious.

His host said, "Don't be misled by the title. Suppose that Clarence Day had told you he was writing a book, and when you asked, 'What on?' replied, 'Oh, it's about my father and mother.' Who in the name of heaven would ever believe it could be the masterpiece it turned out to be? By the same token, to tell you I am writing a book about poodles is to tell you nothing."

There was a poodle cult, he explained, widespread and fascinating. He himself owned a poodle, Cocaud, of surpassing intelligence and charm. Booth Tarkington had a famed poodle. Charles MacArthur and Helen Hayes were poodle addicts; so were Gertrude Stein, Graham Robertson, Ben Hecht, the Walter Lippmanns, the Alan Campbells, and a score more. The book would be enriched by letters and anecdotes from all of these. Essentially it would be far more than a canine treatise; it would be a sort of peg on which to hang the author's philosophy, his views of people and events, his experience of life. Waxman reported back to his office that the idea had definite possibilities as a magazine feature.

It came to nothing. At the time when Woolcott should have been completing the work, an opportunity to return to the stage was presented. Against the potent hypnotism of the footlights, he was a helpless moth. He never wrote the poodle book.

He never, in the precise sense of the term, *wrote* any book.

## 26

### THE BUSY ROUND OF LIFE

RESTLESSNESS was a constant factor in Woolcott's life. He was for ever escaping from one activity into another. Human associations were essential to his happiness. At times, they became poison. The people whom he knew best were mostly of high voltage. They overstimulated him. For the good of his soul he must get away from them.

But where? Solitude and the companionship of his own thoughts plunged him into profound depression. He was saved by that innate optimism which, in its essence, is what keeps the world in general keyed up to going on, the conviction that to-morrow is going to be better than to-day. More than most people, he was guided by a carefully planned future. That there was no stability to the plans did not matter. They served as a blueprint whereby life was made practicable.

An intimate of those days, himself a man of reasonably organized career, states it thus:

If I have more than three dates ahead of me of any kind, I get frightened and panicky. If Aleck didn't have four hundred and fifty he was panicky and nervous. . . . He was a man whose life was scheduled weeks ahead in fantastic detail; you'd get a letter from him saying that he wanted to meet you at 7.48 p.m. on the night of April 17th (which would be two months off). You were to have dinner with him that night and then play cribbage for an hour. He would then leave for Columbia University to deliver a lecture. He would return from the lecture at 10.18 o'clock and you would play cribbage with him until you finished the game that was under way at 11.17, at which time Beatrice Lillie was coming in for a drink. You were then to stay fifteen minutes with Lady Peel, at the end of which time you were to get the hell out because other titled people were coming and you were such scum you couldn't associate with them, naturally. Aleck's future for a considerable distance ahead of him was a series of pictures. If you were set in the picture you were damned well in it. If you threatened to walk out of the picture, or even to move while in it, you took a hell of a thrashing.

Both his occupations and his amusements were of increasing diversity. It was a symptom of his nervous instability that he could resist no offer. Lecturing had at first been a side issue with Woolcott; hardly more than a casual opportunity to air his views and gratify his yearning for showmanship while picking up a few easy dollars.

Now the lecture agents were after him with golden allurements. He viewed them with suspicion, mindful of the plight of a friend who had tied himself up to a disastrous five-year contract assuring him of a scanty twenty per cent of his earnings. Not for Aleck! He would conduct his own tour, with his own manager. His price was from \$750 to \$1,000 per appearance, with \$500-a-week expense allowance while on circuit, and a special stipulation for a certified cheque in Hennessey's managerial hand before the lecturer set foot upon the rostrum—and the bureaux might take it or leave it. They took it and reaped a harvest.

No matter who or what the patron was, there was no relaxing of the Woolcott financial standards. Flustered by the excitement of dealing with the formidable lecturer, a Junior League official in Rochester neglected to have the cheque on hand. For twenty-five minutes Aleck sat firm and stolid while a large and fashionable audience waited and a flurried committee scuttled about to find someone whose signature would be satisfactory.

Lecture touring is, at best, a pretty murderous business, with its overnight jumps, its adjustment to train schedules, and its social concomitants. Woolcott mitigated its rigours so far as possible by spreading his dates. Nevertheless, he found it exhausting. Here is one month's schedule (March 1935), as he outlined it to his publisher, Harold Guinzburg. Several scheduled broadcasts are omitted.

Mar. 7—Lecture at University of Minnesota Convocation.

Mar. 10—Guest of University of Chicago undergraduate society, with Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder.

Mar. 14—Lecture at Toledo.

Mar. 15—Lecture at Detroit.

Mar. 17—Broadcast from Chicago.

Mar. 19—Inspection of Foster Hall, Indianapolis, with the Booth Tarkingtons.

Mar. 20—Lecture at University of Chicago.

Mar. 23—Speech at Signet Club Dinner, Harvard.

Mar. 24—Broadcast, N. Y. City.

Mar. 26—Visit to Laura E. Richards in Maine.

Mar. 27—Lecture at Bowdoin College.

Mar. 31—Broadcast, N. Y. City.

Apr. 1—Death of Mr. Woolcott as thousands cheer.

He approved of himself as a platform speaker. To President Cowley of Hamilton, he wrote:

"I hope that Mrs. Cowley reported that my lecture was good. This would show her a woman of discrimination, for it was damn good."

So thought the feminine populace generally. "Those lecturous women" (as Mrs. Charles Macomb Flandrau called the victims of that attistic mass eroticism which the Germans untranslatably term *schwärmeret*) thronged the ticket booths and would have lionized the celebrity had he been receptive to that sort of group petting. It revolted him. One of the painful requirements of lecturing is that a certain social responsiveness is exacted from a platform notability, in the interests of

the box office. Woollcott was a poor performer of enforcedly gracious antics. Unless in specially good humour, he tartly repudiated luncheons, dinners, club levees, and insufficiently private receptions. Cornered, he was capable of shocking expectant femininity with some such reprisal as the one narrated by Leonard Lyons, of a Los Angeles contretemps. Representatives of the combined women's clubs besieged him in his dressing-room with a citation for his varied achievements. The lecturer, preparing for his entrance to the rostrum, accepted the document and bowed.

"Just a bow?" asked the spokeswoman reproachfully.

"Do say just one word," urged the local manager.

Fixing the intruders with a malignant leer, Woollcott uttered the solicited word in the language of the dove and the accents of the serpent.

"Coo," he breathed.

He was equally in demand with colleges. By 1936, as he proudly noted, pretty much every institution of the higher learning in the United States had formally invited him to address it, except the University of Virginia, Swarthmore, and his own Alma Mater, Hamilton,<sup>1</sup> and he proposed to see that this last neglect was remedied. For academic appearances he lowered his rates to little or nothing. After these appearances, he exchanged the misanthropy of Old Scrooge for the good-fellowship of Mr. Pickwick, sitting around over beer and sandwiches and extending his remarks far into the small hours for the enraptured undergraduates.

In his way, he was unexcelled as a platform artist. He was admirably easy. His first sentence established a rapport with the audience. Not only were they interested in what he had to say; they liked the man behind the words. Nobody could better tell an anecdote or more readily establish a personality. Whether he talked of Helen Hayes, or Helen Keller, H. G. Wells or Justice Holmes, it was as if he were presenting them personally to his hearers. Unlike most lecturers, he did not write out his address and learn it by heart. He made voluminous notes, often in the car en route to the place, and spoke from his memory of these. Thus there was no effect of routine in his delivery, but an inimitable fluency, resource, and spontaneity.

<sup>1</sup> Herein he was inexplicably mistaken. Not only had Hamilton invited him, but he had made no less than three appearances on the chapel platform. Perhaps he had in mind his thwarted ambition, supported by adroit and determined wire-pulling, to get an appointment as once-a-year College Preacher.

He was not above experimenting with tricky effects. To one platform he brought the Town Crier's bell as introduction. Again, he came on munching an apple, which he delicately placed beside the conventional glass of water before opening his discourse. Neither device took with the audience. Not all of his lectures were popular. There was one on the Phalanx which failed to make a hit, and another upon the space-time theory of Dunne that was pretty dull. Both were dropped. What the public wanted from Alexander Woolcott was opinion spiced with personal reminiscence, experience, and anecdote, and when this was offered the S.R.O. sign went out early. In St. Paul he spoke to 12,000 paid admissions, mostly women. His last appearance in San Francisco filled the city's largest auditorium, with an overflow into another hall served by loudspeaker. His regular popular offerings drew "capacity." In no instance was he anything but a moneymaker for the contracting parties.

The strain of touring wrought like a malignant infection in him, which he worked off in gratuitous insults to whoever was in range. The chairwoman of a Forest Hills, N. Y., club, introducing him to his audience, recalled that she had met him at a wedding some years before. The casual remark stirred in him that morbid resentment of any claim upon his acquaintanceship which was one of the most curious and unamiable phases of his character. His opening sentence was a flat disclaimer that he had ever been at the wedding or met the lady. This is the more remarkable in that he knew her to be the sister of one of his nearest friends at Hamilton College. The instance is typical. Dozens of similar incivilities are reported of him from the lecture circuit.

Another old friend wrote him while he was on tour that he *must* meet her aunt when he reached St. Louis—a dear, delightful old lady who was a devoted admirer of his writings. The answer was a curt, "I already know too many people."

This may be taken as no more than a symptom of the low fever engendered by the rigours of lecture touring. He was steadily expanding his circle. His withdrawals to the safe hermitage of Bomoseen to evade the pressures of an intrusive world were, as has been indicated, far from monastic. People in general, notwithstanding his reiterated professions of distaste, exercised a powerful pull upon him. He kept a metropolitan *pied-à-terre* at the Hotel Gotham, where he held daily levees.

He would have been no true child of the Phalanx had he not secreted



in his blood a strong ichor of altruism. Men of intellectual power do not get religion via the Sawdust Trail. Woollcott's was the religion of humanity. Latent in him since boyhood, it found increasing expression with his increasing powers, not infrequently against his self-interest. He did good by stealth and if he did not blush (being constitutionally inhibited from that signal of invaded modesty) was extremely annoyed to find it fame.

The charity nearest to his heart was The Seeing Eye. This was an organization which trained and supplied dogs to guide the blind. Aleck's own eyesight was subnormal from childhood, and though, so far as his lifelong associates know, he was never actually threatened with blindness, I think that an unconquered fear must have lurked in his heart. He was acutely susceptible to the visual misfortunes of others. When Booth Tarkington's vision was in question, Aleck slept ill until the happy outcome of a delicate operation was telegraphed to him.

He was a very busy and not a very well man when news of my wife's serious eye condition reached him. The first mail brought me his letter.

"Tell her that I ache for her and that when she needs someone to come and read aloud to her, I will respond as to a three-alarm fire."

Years ago, Mrs. Harrison Eustis of Philadelphia started more than she could possibly have foreseen with an article in *The Saturday Evening Post* about an experiment of hers in breeding German shepherd dogs for intelligence and character rather than for cars, tails, and bench-show blue ribbons. If these animals could take care of sheep, why, asked Mrs. Eustis, could not they be educated to look after helpless humans? She interested Elliott ("Jack") Humphrey, up to then a horse expert with a touch of genius as a practical geneticist, and the result was the now flourishing Seeing Eye Training School at Whippany, N. J., where the dogs are trained for many months to guide the blind, and the visiting blind are trained for one month to adapt themselves to their canine guides.

At a banquet in New York, Woollcott was sustaining the minor throes of boredom when he saw a man being expertly piloted through the cocktail crowd by a beautiful and vigilant shepherd dog, and became so interested that, a few days later, he was on his way to the New Jersey place. Of that first visit, Austin Strong, also a devotee of the movement, has written in his article, "I Go to the Dogs":

... he was led into the dining-room where all the sixteen blind students were seated. Woolcott entertained them with stories and set the table in a roar. Suddenly he stopped and looked about questioningly.

"Where do you keep your dogs while you are at meals?"

"They are all here, Mr. Woolcott, enjoying your stories."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the astonished Town Crier, as he peered down over his glasses catching sight of the tip of a dog's tail sticking out from under the table. He pushed back his chair and, for all his weight, got down on his hands and knees and looked into the friendly eyes of sixteen dogs who pricked their thirty-two ears politely at him, smiling as they thumped their sixteen tails. A trifle pixilated, Woolcott struggled heavily to his feet and taking off his glasses, wiped them. For once he was at a loss for a word, but from that moment on he became a champion for The Seeing Eye, giving his voice and strength to help free many a man and woman from the bondage of darkness.

Woolcott's first "boost" was the article on Jack Humphrey over which *The New Yorker's* editorial force suffered such pangs. Just because of his enthusiasm, he grossly overwrote. Later he published privately for the good of the cause a more tempered and effective presentation in booklet form, *The Good Companions*. His most productive effort was over the radio, a broadcast which brought in \$3,700 to add to the \$1,500 Cream of Wheat payment already contributed by him. Still another gift was the emolument for a lecture in Indianapolis: \$1,000 which he divided between The Seeing Eye and a local school of which (says Booth Tarkington, who probably lured him into the deal) "he knew nothing except that some good people were struggling to maintain it." Doubtless there was further help on his part concerning which he kept his own counsel. Aleck was prone to display the cloven hoof rather than the helping hand.

Of all the tributes to the dead Town Crier, the most moving, to my mind, was that published in *The Seeing Eye Guide*, to which I am indebted for permission to reproduce it in whole, with the explicit and unfortunate interdiction that the distinguished writer's name be withheld:

### ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT

1887—1943

Not long ago it came to pass that a man found himself before a gate which opened to a sky of stars. He stood puzzled, wrapping his famous muffler closer around his neck. Being curious, as was his wont in life, he peered about over his glasses and lo, he beheld a group of shepherd dogs with ears alert, recognition

in their eyes. They came bounding noiselessly forward and sat in a circle about him, eyeing him with eagerness.

"What goes on here?" he asked the Custodian who appeared and stood at his side.

"These are your friends."

"I don't understand."

"These are the dogs to whose masters you gave your voice and strength to free them from the bondage of darkness."

For once the Town Crier was at a loss for a word.

"Where do I go?" he asked, "I cannot see the way."

A great dog came and stood at his left side.

"Take hold of his harness," said the Custodian, "he will guide you."

His efforts for the sufferers from eye afflictions were not confined to The Seeing Eye. At his own expense of time plus an outlay of money he compiled a selection of favourite essays and stories, "The Woolcott Listener," for distribution in phonograph records through the American Foundation for the Blind. A warm-hearted New Jersey woman started a movement to collect old eyeglasses for the needy with impaired vision. The attempt was making little progress when the Town Crier learned of it, and put it on the air, as follows:

... the other day ... I stumbled upon the silent and unsung activities in which one of my own neighbours has been engaged ... introducing an appeal for old spectacles for the needy, and suggesting that most families have a disused pair hanging about somewhere. ... Some poor man would be grateful to have the discards which Aunt Matilda had put away in the little top drawer of her desk along with stub ends of sealing wax, six recipes, a poem by Eddie Guest she cut out of the paper one day, and four or five keys which might be ever so useful if she could only remember what locks they fitted. ... Let her send them to Mrs. Arthur Terry of Short Hills, New Jersey. Terry. T for tombstone, E for eggplant, R for rhododendron, Y for Youngstown. Terry. You know. Same as Ellen Terry or Terry McGovern. ... Mrs. Terry madly collects all the spectacles she can, discarded frames of silver, tortoise shell, or gold, part of the detritus of American family life, and keeps stocks of them on tap at several clinics where they can be given to those who need them most.

The response to that one broadcast was three thousand, two hundred-odd pairs.

As a matter of business Alexander Woolcott was quite capable of holding up a lecture audience until the certified cheque for the evening's work was in his manager's pocket. Once the money was paid, it was likely to be diverted to the first charity, public or private, that stirred

his hair-trigger beneficence. At the time he was "appalled at the magnitude of his bank account," he would turn in an article to Agent George Bye, with the query, "What are we going to get for this?"

Bye would estimate twelve hundred, fifteen hundred, twenty-five hundred dollars. Then Aleck, cudgelling his memory, "So-and-so has had hard luck. I'll make over the article to him and you can send him the cheque, direct."

Or, "How long since I've given anything to the Such-and-Such Association? Turn this one over to them, will you?"

Out of his old correspondence pop references to financial operations, whereof he had apparently made no record elsewhere: one hundred dollars loaned here; fifty, there; a query, "How much do you need to see you through?"; a tactful suggestion, "All this must have hit you hard. If I can help . . ." These small aids were on the principle of "when-you're-through-with-it-pass-it-on-to-some-other-low-character."

His Vermont neighbour, Dorothy Thompson, wrote him about some local charitable organization in which she was interested, at a time when medical and hospital bills had all but bankrupted him. He sent her his cheque for \$50 with the comment that being broke "always induces in me a giddy state of financial irresponsibility," and further invited her to bring her whole flock of protégés for a day's picnic at Neshobe.

Not all his private transactions were small. To one secretary he loaned \$6,000. A college friend received \$4,000. Such loans he counted upon recouping. Anything under \$500 he was as likely as not to forget. At no time was there an interruption to his educational donations. Nobody will ever know how many students owed their Hamilton training, in whole or in part, to him; the operations cover too long a period to be comprised in the secretarial records. One of his nieces had her college course at his expense. He wanted her, as well as the other three, to become reporters, considering daily journalism the most adventurous, broadening, and pleasurable department of professional endeavour. Three of the girls followed his advice.

Such disbursements were his form of "gambling on humanity." He deemed "few privileges as valuable as the occasional privilege of being of service" in this way.

The gamble on humanity which, in his considered opinion, paid him the most satisfactory return was his financing of an impecunious

medical student, "the best investment I ever made." While Aleck was undergoing his hospital course of heroic treatment for the reduction of fat, young Frode Jensen, who had graduated from Hamilton the year before in the class of '33, called to see him. Anyone who could talk to the alumnus of '09 about his beloved Hill was welcome. But Aleck had already met the young man and knew of his picturesque career through Edward W. Root, who had taken an interest in the undergraduate foreigner.

At the age of thirteen, Jensen had run away from a brutal stepfather in Denmark, found a job as cabin boy on a liner, and after several trips in that capacity made his illegal entry into the United States, where he was resolved to stay. He led a knockabout life as newspaper errand boy, odd-jobs worker, and camp scullion; through a fortuitous meeting with a well-to-do American who had tipped him liberally on ship-board and remembered him with interest, he got into Green Mountain College, and thence to Hamilton.

Life on the Hill was comparatively easy for the hardy Dane. All that he had to do in the way of self-maintenance was to run laundry, wait on table, and act as chapel bellringer, besides keeping up with his studies. In senior year he was captain of the football team, and recipient of the coveted T, voted by the undergraduate body to the squarest man on the campus. He met at the Root house Alexander Woollcott, L.H.D., who said kindly, "Come and see me sometime," and, having several other matters on his mind, let it go at that.

Jensen did not forget. He was working his way through his first year at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York when he learned of Dr. Woollcott's being in hospital, and called on him. After the usual exchange of college news, the old alumnus asked the new how he was getting on. All right, said Jensen sturdily. What was he doing? Well, among other things, he was operating the elevator, translating Scandinavian medical reports for the Academy of Medicine, and coaching football at Riverdale Academy. Did that leave him time enough for his studies? Well, no, it didn't. To be quite frank, he was dropping out at the end of the year.

"Not at all," said Woollcott in his most magisterial style. "You are finishing your course."

He offered a bargain: he would back the student through to graduation, on condition that all activities other than study be eliminated.

"Mayn't I even run the elevator?" asked Jensen.

Not even that. The agreement was made, but the young medico welshed, his last year, to the extent of waiting on table for money enough to buy an engagement ring. Further acquaintance with him ripened into an affection so warm that Aleck came to regard him as "the son I might and ought to have had." He officiated as best man at the Jensen-Leonard wedding and was godfather to the first child.

Dr. Jensen went to Syracuse as assistant pathologist in the Medical School, then became an associate of Al Getman, Aleck's dear friend, and is now Captain Jensen of the Army Medical Corps. Aleck's last non-posthumous book, *As You Were*, is dedicated "To Frode Jensen, overseas."

That legendary figure of Ship News, "Skipper" Williams, died and was buried from Grace Church. Many survivors of the old *Times* staff attended the services, among them Woolcott, who had risen from a sick-bed to obey the sentimental impulsion which journalistic tradition so potently exercised upon him. The newspaper shortly after acknowledged an anonymous contribution to its "Hundred Neediest Cases": \$500 "in memory of Skipper Williams" from "an old newspaper man who never expected to live this long and be solvent." The secret donor was Alexander Woolcott.

After Canada was at war and before America was, the Woolcott comedy was playing Montreal. The idea of taking money out of the hard-pressed country did not impress the star favourably. He turned over both salary and percentage to the British War Relief, an example promptly followed by Sam Harris, the producer, and George Kaufman and Moss Hart, the playwrights. Aleck pretended to be nauseated by a letter from Rachel Crothers, extolling his conduct as "glorious." It was all bluff. He really loved it.

However he might pretend to resent them, testimonials to his good will actually thrilled him. Fan mail in response to his broadcast delighted his soul. It was a profound satisfaction to him to feel that his messages of humanity, fellowship, and kindness were helping thousands of persons unknown to him out there in the void, lightening the tedium of the sick-room, easing pain, and distracting worries. The fact is—and I set it forth in the full expectation of provoking howls of protest from those who have suffered from his gratuitous asperities—that beneath his crabbed shell, there was a deep well of loving kindness for people in general, and loyal affection for those about him. "Wasp

or honey-bee at will," F. Tennyson Jesse said of him, and Danton Walker, who was privy to his most personal concerns, wrote:

"No one knows, or ever will know, the generous and thoughtful things he did for his friends and his family, and it is not my place to tell."

He might answer some perfectly natural and proper request with an outpouring of insults, and the next hour submit with good humour to the most trivial trespass upon his time. A college mate whom he hardly knew wrote to ask the address of an acquaintance: he had tried clubs, hotels, friends, every source he could think of, without result. Aleck responded with restrained urbanity:

As a former newspaperman, I have been called upon frequently to do a bit of sleuthing and I learned long ago that the quickest and easiest way to locate a party is to look in that most implausible of all places, the telephone book. You will find your man listed under the M's.

The most surprising people came to him for advice on their personal complications. How wise a guide he was is beside the question. The salient fact is that he would go far out of his way to be helpful, often to people with no possible claim upon his consideration. Dorothy Parker, who is something less than a dripping honeycomb of saccharinity, declared that he performed more kindnesses than any other person she had ever known, adding for good measure that she learned this from the people benefited; from him she would never have heard it.

I have been deeply impressed by the number and the variety of people encountered in the round of my inquiries who have said to me, in general purport, "If I were in serious trouble and Alexander Woollcott were still alive, he is the person to whom I would turn first."

Civic virtue is a term which would probably have provoked him to jeers. Nevertheless, it was innate in him. He threw himself into the most diverse movements. One week he would be broadcasting, gratis, for the Red Cross, or Bundles for Britain; the next, supporting with voice and purse some defence by the Civil Liberties Union of a cause otherwise defenceless, or speaking from John Haynes Holmes's Community Church pulpit on "Noble Failures," with the Phalanx for text. Kathleen Norris interested him in that monstrous miscarriage of California justice which sentenced David Lamson, the young Stanford University faculty member, to death, and with donations of money

and protests, both public and private, he became an important factor in securing a fair trial and vindication for the accused man.

Invited to name his terms for a college lecture, he would reply, "How much can you reasonably afford?" He charged the Columbia School of Journalism less than ten per cent of his customary rate for a series, which, incidentally, was so popular that special guards had to be called to handle the crowd. This was at the time when he was medically sentenced to three weeks of retirement and weakening diet. He made it a condition of going to the hospital that he should be released once a week for the Columbia lectures. His course at the New School for Social Research was given gratis. Out of his own pocket he financed the Hamilton Choir's annual visits to New York before, through his radio vogue, he had made its vocal classics nationally known.

The final work of his life was the compilation of the selections for servicemen's reading, *As You Were*. Neither he nor his publisher, the Viking Press, received a dollar's profit from it.

Generous though he was of his time and energy, he was also jealous of them. He resigned from the Board of Trustees of Hamilton because he felt himself "of no more use or influence than a cigar-store Indian," and would not waste his time as a dummy director. No other man of equal prominence within my knowledge was on so few boards. Honorary appointments revolted him. Where he gave his name, service went with it. Such was the Woollcott conception of responsibility.

Inevitably his zeal for the public good took form in social and political activities. He stumped for Heywood Broun on the Socialist ticket. Later, when Broun taunted him with having found nothing but amusement in the striking waiters' efforts for better wages and conditions (Woollcott had been grossly misquoted), he undertook to make clear his sympathies by participation in the slightly absurd waiters' strike at the Waldorf, where he went with Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker. Owing to an engagement to broadcast, he had to leave just as the minor riot in the Empire Room was developing. Still smarting next day, he said aggrievedly to a reporter:

"My God, man! I want to tell you, it was no fun trying to help out a good cause, and then, of all things, to be caught running out of a fight." (It was the only time on record, a fact which, of course, he did not mention.)

He was a passionate protagonist for freedom of speech. In one of his



addresses he exhorted his hearers, "If there is anyone in this audience who believes that Father Coughlin is pouring out poison and nonsense, don't ask that he be shut up. Let him talk."

A radical young acquaintance of his was being denounced as a Communist and a Red. He wrote her a letter of support.

"Your views will land you in a concentration camp. But if you change them in the least, I'll never speak to you again."

His political thinking, inspired though it was by patriotism and conscience, was unclear. To Van Anda he declared himself a Communist, but *The Times* editor thinks that his creed of Communism was both vague and mild. Later he embraced Socialism. George Backer, who has long adhered to that school of thought, could find little but good intentions in his friend's Socialistic creed. To one tenet he held unswervingly: he was a convinced liberal and humanitarian. His clearest profession of faith was delivered over the air on the Cream of Wheat programme in 1935:

*I have small patience with those who think it can all be done in Washington by a turn of the wrist. But I have even less patience with those who have so large and comprehensive a view of the world's needs as to be unable to see the immediate personal necessity of the man next door. I really loathe the well-fed citizen who can see his desperate neighbour's kids going hungry and say, "Ah, yes, very sad, very sad, but, after all, anything I gave them would be just a drop in the bucket. There are millions of people starving in China." I have always remembered a pungent bit of advice, given, oddly enough, by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. He suggested to those about him in England that, pending the millennium, each man take hold of a piece of the depression next him and do something about it.*

He took his politics personally. Anyone who was not for his candidate was against him (Woollcott) and presumptively actuated by sordid motives into the bargain. He impugned the good faith of Herbert Bayard Swope in the first LaGuardia mayoralty campaign, thereby irreparably breaching an already undermined friendship. He publicly attacked Arthur Hays Sulzberger of *The Times*, one of his overseas comrades, for supporting Willkie. On the same count he tried to pick a fight with Booth Tarkington, but his most virulent polemics were ineffectual against the smiling obduracy of the novelist's good temper, and he gave it up on the mutual understanding that "we will be gentle with one another hereafter." No one, it is worth noting, has ever successfully promoted a quarrel with Tarkington.

With others, Woolcott's belligerency had more positive results. It was political issues that temporarily alienated him from two of his fondest feminine associations: those with Neysa McMein and Grace Eustis. Hardly a Republican friend of his who was not at one time or another made target for the slings and arrows of his outrageous partisanship. His circle marvelled that he could keep the peace with the family whom he called "the Oyster Bay or out-of-season Roosevelts," Theodore and his wife, Eleanor, and Alice Longworth, no dove of peace herself. With doubtful taste he baited the latter, over a nationwide hookup, for having bet him one hundred dollars on Landon.

Fired by the righteousness of whatever political crusade enlisted his support, he was capable of being unscrupulous, and he thus damaged, though without wholly alienating, one of his most prized friendships. It was just after Dewey's first nomination for Governor of New York, and before Lehman was expected to accept a renomination. Dining at the Edward W. Root's in Clinton, Aleck heard Mrs. Root express the opinion that Lehman had been an excellent governor, and made a mental and highly inaccurate note of it. What was her amazement at hearing the Town Crier, next day, delivering this message over the radio:

"Mrs. Edward Root, daughter-in-law of Elihu Root, and so a member of that rock-ribbed and distinguished Republican clan, told me last night that she was too bored with Dewey to vote for him."

Justifiably angered, since she had felt and certainly voiced no opposition to her party's candidate, Mrs. Root called the broadcaster sharply to account. He was apparently amused at her perturbation.

"Why, Grace!" said he. "I thought you'd enjoy the publicity."

When convinced to the contrary, he became, for once, openly contrite, going so far as to offer to make a special broadcast in retraction. She declined. The former warmth of their friendship was never quite restored.

Anything that Woolcott might say was pretty sure to make the newspaper headlines; much that he said was carefully calculated to provoke retort and thus secure further publicity, always an asset in practical politics. The New York mayoralty contest of 1937 found him again in LaGuardia's corner, with a speech which irritated an official opponent to the point of paying out good money to advertise his indignation. The counterblast is so charmingly reminiscent of a lost

art of controversy in print, the eighteenth-century broadside, that it is worth reproducing in full:

Political

THANKS MR. BUSH

Western Union  
New York, N.Y.  
Oct. 31, 1937

Harold W. Hastings  
27 East 95th St.  
New York City

I had intended to split my ticket and vote for Dewey until I heard Woollcott say that those voting against LaGuardia and Dewey were crooks grafters and muddleheads stop I am not a crook I never grafted and I resent being called a muddlehead by a non-resident of Manhattan stop I shall vote for you and will devote Monday to telephoning and telegraphing my key men as to my decision stop Woollcotts talk should have gained twenty thousand votes for you

Wilson D. Bush  
New York City

Citizens Committee for the Election of Harold W. Hastings for District Attorney

Henry Sobel *Chairman*

## 27

### OF ROYAL PREROGATIVE

"WOOLLCOTT," in block letters, stood starkly impressive at the top of the Bomoseen stationery.

E. B. White animadverted delightedly in *Harper's* upon its magnificent simplicity: "just *Woollcott*, thus casting aside, in kingly style, the repulsive notion that there could be another by that name."

"An appointment with him gave you the feeling," wrote Mr. White, "that the slightest miscarriage might throw the whole human society out of kilter."

Woollcott came to feel rather that way about it himself. His was not the illusion but rather the assumption of grandeur. Within his realm he established himself as a despot, benevolent in intention but

not always in performance. His pronouncements were of Jovian authority.

"My word in such matters is final," he told Ira Gershwin (whom he affectionately addressed as "You contumacious rat"), putting a peremptory end to a difference as to the proper use of a participial adjective. In that particular instance his word was also wrong.

Correcting the errors of others, an exercise to which he was gleefully prone, did not serve to keep him on guard against his own. In *Our Mrs. Parker*<sup>1</sup> he takes to task a then Harvard freshman for a slip in construction. Two pages further along, the critic is guilty of a particularly ill-related "dangling clause," certainly a sorer offence against correct usage than the Harvardian's slightly strained subjunctive. He calls the young man William Allen White, Jr. There is no such person as William Allen White, Jr. The freshman was William Allen White's son—Woolcott was right thus far—but his name is William L. White.

Aleck's form of invitation was a royal command by telephone or telegram.

"I can see you at my apartment between 5 and 5.30 Friday. Good-bye."

One of these ukases was misdirected to Percy Hammond.

"You're not going, surely!" said Mrs. Hammond.

"How can I?" grinned Percy. "My silk knickerbockers are at the tailor's."

F.P.A. noted, as early as 1934, a certain lofty attitude towards "hero-worshippers as A. Woolcott used to call anybody who said anything as kindly to him as 'Good morning.'"

Before they became intimates, Howard Dietz questioned his ultimatum in a game of anagrams.

"Are you trying to cross me?" demanded the authority.

With a significant glance at the other's mountainous abdominal bulge, Dietz retorted: "Not without an alpenstock."

Aleck gave a surprised snort and subsided.

The importance of other people seldom inhibited him. He sent word in San Francisco to Malvina Thompson, Mrs. Roosevelt's personal secretary, that he wanted to see the President's wife alone, "and none of her followers or parasites, not even you, Tommy." Thus he ordained and thus it was. Mrs. Roosevelt's attitude towards him was one of amused and friendly tolerance, just a little such as a queen might

<sup>1</sup> *White, 'The Burns*.

exhibit towards the court jester. There was, indeed, something naïve and conciliatory in his most bumptious impertinences.

It was the amiable if sometimes disconcerting Woollcott custom to call up a friend and announce, "I can dine with you next Tuesday evening. Have so-and-so there. I want to talk to him."

His precocious young niece, Polly, had something when, seeking to elucidate to Irving Berlin the cause of her admiration for her uncle, she thoughtfully explained that he was "so Christalmighty magnificent."<sup>1</sup>

To Mrs. George Madden Martin, who telephoned from her home in Louisville to ask what she could do by way of making his stay pleasant, he replied: "I'm not going to do a thing you want me to do and you're going to do everything I want you to do."

"And so it came about," says Mrs. Martin.

So it usually came about in his circles. Not that his friends were so many Caspar Milquetoasts, but simply that it was the easy method of keeping the peace, as between indulgent elders and spoiled child.

He said to Gertrude Stein at their first meeting, "You have not been in New York long enough to know that I am never contradicted."

One may speculate on what the outcome would have been, had she replied in kind. Probably his retort would have been an appreciative grin. As Booth Tarkington pointed out, he loved a well-turned insult for its own sake, whether projected by him or at him. Miss Stein was too astonished to make the appropriate reply. When next they met, he was amiability incarnate. They became friendly and so remained.

He had no formula for apology. His one-time secretary, Danton Walker, could not recall any instance in which he "admitted himself in the wrong about anything, whatever the proof to the contrary."

Dorothy Parker's reward for correcting a misquotation on his part was a scrawled, "Thank you, you mildewed sheeny."

Neysa McMein differed with him on the Sacco-Vanzetti case, and was the recipient of such verbal abuse that she banished him from her presence for six months.

He took praise no better than correction. Walter Winchell, by way of improving a casual acquaintanceship, said to him, "I thought your piece Sunday was wonderful."

"Don't be a bore," said Woollcott, turning the curve of a shoulder upon the flatterer. Two of the *Tribune* by-liners, Percy Hammond and

<sup>1</sup> *None but a Mule*, by Barbara Woollcott.

Richard Watts, got the same frigid reception for a complimentary opinion. Hammond, who was a modest and sensitive person, at the time still unsure of his reception in New York, never quite forgave it. When, within a short time, the ex-Chicago critic established a reputation for brilliancy and wit above that of any contemporary with the possible exception of Heywood Brown, Woollcott was quick to recognize it and accord to the style of the newcomer ungrudging admiration and openly expressed envy. Something made him aware of the other's quiet disregard for him. He asked a friend:

"Why does Percy Hammond dislike me?"

"Because you were insulting to him."

"Oh! Was I?" Woollcott meditated. "You don't suppose he took it seriously, do you?" he asked incredulously.

In affronting the Winchells, the Hammonds, and the Wattses, Woollcott was at least taking on opponents of his own size. He could be equally ruthless with young, unknown, and defenceless admirers. From all over the country come reports of these minor cruelties. As a sample, the experience of a budding writer just out of college will serve. The youth encountered the great man at a sparsely attended piano recital in Carnegie Hall, and approached him in the intermission.

"Aren't you Alexander Woollcott?"

The other turned upon him a startled and fishy eye.

"Yes," he snapped.

"I'd like to shake hands with you."

Woollcott retreated. "Why? Why?" he demanded wildly.

Taken aback, the young man began: "I admired so much your work for *The Seeing Eye*."

"Nonsense! Nonsense!" barked Woollcott and waddled hurriedly down the stairs.

When Henry Morton Robinson, as Associate Editor of *The Reader's Digest*, had occasion, years later, to edit some of Woollcott's contributions, he had difficulty in compelling himself to an impartial attitude, so well preserved were his memory and his dislike of the episode recounted above. They came to technical issue over minor points, but neither ever referred to that first encounter in the Carnegie Hall gallery.

All such asperities have root in common ground, Woollcott's ingrained awkwardness and gracelessness. Eulogy, expressed or implied, threw him into a sort of panic. He responded like a startled animal,

with a show of teeth. In his childhood days at the Phalanx he heard from that stern patriarch, his grandfather, a jingle much dinned into the ears of earlier generations:

Praise to the face  
Is open disgrace.

It stuck. Against a compliment he had no better defence than a snarl.

There was another element in the glittering incivilities of which Aleck was so lavish. In view of his college record, I am inclined to believe that much of the performance was impish experimentalism, in that he half-expected to be slapped down, as he had been by the campus athletes whom he had so expertly "scurfed." That he was so often permitted to get away with such offences encouraged and developed further arrogances, at times playful and with tongue in cheek, again plain ugly.

Certainly the friends and associates for whom he had the most respect were those who would stand no nonsense from him such as, professionally, Van Anda of *The Times*, Mrs. White of *The New Yorker*, and Swope-o'-*The-World*; personally, George Backer, Howard Dietz, Al Getman (for years his physician), Harpo Marx, Booth Tarkington, Heywood Broun, and Franklin P. Adams.

Even from less intimate friends he could accept reprisals with an equable spirit. Annoyed at his unholy glee over the rejection of a friend, for political reasons, by an organization to which he sought membership, one of Aleck's older acquaintances said to him with perhaps superfluous sharpness:

"That doesn't come so well from you, Woollcott, considering that there isn't a club in New York into which you could pry your way with a crowbar."

Instead of venting the expected outburst of wrath, he paused, as if running over the probabilities in his head, then replied quietly, "Why, I suppose that's so."

Rules and regulations he simply brushed aside. When Ina Claire called on him at the Hotel Gotham, which was his New York habitat after he took up his permanent residence at Bomoseen, he told the clerk to send her up to his apartment.

"I can't, Mr. Woollcott. She has a dog with her."

"Well, send up the dog, too."

"Sorry, sir. There's a rule against it."

"Either Miss Claire and her dog come up or I come down," said the guest firmly. He added, "I'm in my pyjamas."

The quiet lobby of the Gotham was no place for such an apparition.

"They'll be up right away," the clerk hastened to give assurance.

In their brilliant thumbnail biographical sketch, prefatory to the volume of Woolcott *Letters*, Mrs. Kaufman and Mr. Hennessey say of their subject:

"He accepted criticism cheerfully and was never reluctant to admit it when he was in the wrong."

That opinion must have been received with a measure of astonishment in the editorial sancta of the nation, where Woolcott's insistence upon infallibility was the bane of every editor with whom he did business. It was all very well for him to disclaim privately to his friend George Backer any pretensions to artistry: "I know I'm not a writer, George." Modesty was but skin-deep with him. Let the editorial blue pencil touch him on the raw and he coiled for defence. The troubles of *The New Yorker* over his page have been described. They were paralleled in varying degrees in a dozen other publication offices. One editor over whom the lingering dread of the dead author so hovers that he insists upon anonymity writes me, "He was at all times difficult to deal with—in many respects very difficult. The episodes I remember most distinctly were a little to his discredit." Another says succinctly, "Just a pain in the neck." And a third, "His stuff was good. But was it worth all the trouble it cost us? Sometimes I doubt it." He had one stereotyped retort in defence of any article that came under criticism. The impugned contribution became automatically "one of the best things I've ever written." Sometimes he inveighed against editorial stupidity; again he would mourn in dignified sorrow the lack of discrimination on the part of magazine staffs. He would fight at the drop of a hat on so slight an issue as punctuation.

"You have destroyed my inner structure," he accused Henry Morton Robinson. "I have raised the semicolon to its zenith"; thus paraphrasing Somerset Maugham's litterateuse whose admiring friends gloated that there was no other who could "put such a wealth of wit and satire and comic observation into a semicolon."

In only one instance, so far as my research extends, did he officially admit that his product was below par. This was in his editorial relations with *The Reader's Digest*. As in the case of radio, the *Digest* was an object of early suspicion to him because it embodied a new idea



and was therefore a potential trespass upon his territory. Nevertheless, he acceded to a request for an article; there was some dissatisfaction with it, and he wrote pettishly to a friend:

"Mr. Wallace" (DeWitt Wallace, editor of the *Digest*) "has destroyed the pleasure of reading; now he is about to destroy the pleasure of writing."

Invited to consider the magazine as a medium for his series of "Lessons in English," he took a more amiable view. It might be worth trying. The early "Lessons" disappointed their author by the quality of the initial response in fan mail. That the articles were repetitious of his earlier pedagogics in print and on the radio did not occur to him as an explanation. He attributed the unsatisfactory reception to the low I.Q. of the *Digest's* clientele and indicated to the editor that the magazine's readers were hardly up to his level. The series continued, there was no improvement in the response, and the contributor had a strange movement of humility.

He motored two hundred and fifty miles to apologize to Wallace and to express his conviction that the fault lay with the writer and not with the readers. Thereafter there was never any trouble. Wallace thinks that Woolcott had softened, become mellowed, more reasonable as he grew older. When the Professor of the "Lessons" joined the staff as Roving Editor, he accepted the deletion of a full page from one of his contributions without a murmur. Anyone who thinks that the \$2,400 per article had any bearing upon his amenity does not know Alexander Woolcott. Money did not operate that way on his emotions.

For example, he received from *McCall's Magazine* not only the most considerate treatment imaginable, but also the highest rate for literary criticism in the history of the craft. It weighed nothing against a minor discontent on a technical point, which he expressed to a *Cosmopolitan* editor:

"I got dissatisfied with the way my monthly piece in *McCall's* looked. It was chopped up. As soon as I got into a criticism of a book the reader had to turn over to Campbell's Soup to find out what else I had said. This kind of make-up irritated me so much that I went to Wiese" (Editor of *McCall's*) "and suggested he give me a page a month for a piece which would begin and end on the same page. He agreed to do this. But after doing four I decided that *McCall's* audience was pretty foreign to the type of thing I wanted to write, so I called it off, giving as an excuse my radio contract."

*Collier's Weekly* had its troubles with him during the three years he was a frequent contributor, a far echo of which may still greet the astonished visitor to its offices through the voice of a bootblack soliciting trade in the formula, "Shine your shoon, sir? Shoon-shine?"

The archaism goes back to a Woolcott article of historical flavour, in which there occurred a reference to a character's shoon. The editor of first instance corrected it to read "shoes." Back came the proof with a bristling note: when a Woolcott character was shod with shoon he was shod with SHOON and not with shoes or boots or pumps or any other kind of goddam footgear that might occur to the muddled mind of some myopic, syphilitic, parietic \$35-a-week type-tinkerer, and he was marking proof accordingly. The galley went upstairs without the note, whereupon the reader, in all innocence of soul, removed the shoon and put back the shoes.

In this form it reached William L. Chenery, the editor, who, having been swept by the fiery breath of Woolcott's wrath, restored the word to its pristine quality, adding a note to the effect that if the author wanted shoon, he was entitled to them. Incredible as it may seem, the printer missed the editorial instruction. The hero appeared in the magazine irretrievably wearing shoes. Walter Davenport of the staff recalls the dire effect.

"Aleck read it and had a conniption fit. He raised so much hell that for months, in fact for years, the word 'shoes' was spoken in these precincts only with bated breath. Even our office bootblack in his quest for business would intone 'Shoon-shine; shoo-oo-oon-shine' in an operatic tenor."

In the *Cosmopolitan* office, Woolcott was known as Old Untouchable, and to the end he held grimly to his prerogative. What was probably the last article from his pen was commissioned by that magazine, a short "opinion piece" on Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which Woolcott admired so fervidly. He set about the job with excited enthusiasm—and produced a near-flop, so verbose, so fumbling, and so dull that it was returned with a courteous request for revision. Out popped the inevitable and resentful rebuttal: "one of the best pieces I've ever turned out." The editors were regretful but firm; in that form it was up to neither the Woolcott nor the *Cosmopolitan* standard.

"I am sorry," the author telephoned Percy Waxman in pained dignity, "but it does not seem that you and I can work together any more."

For once no personal ill-feeling accompanied the editorial estrangement. The two men remained on friendly terms.

Conversation was to Alexander Woollcott a divine right of which he made the most. He was the most determined talker of his time, and, at his best, one of the most entertaining. Early in his life, as the family noted with admiration not unmingled with dismay, little Alexander H. had assumed the role of Autocrat of the Breakfast Table. Later, in campus "bull sessions" his was the prevailing voice. His room mates of newspaper days lost countless hours of sleep to his monologues. War could not hush those accents; along the western front there issued from many, an embattled trench the voice of Woollcott punctuating the shell bursts with eager reminiscence. The habit grew to formidable proportions until it became the passion and finally the obsession of his life. Theoretically he knew better. Listening he prescribed as "almost the whole secret of good manners." He seldom practised it, and when he did, it was impatiently and under compulsion.

Always a welcome guest on College Hill, Aleck was nevertheless something of a trial to the most patient of hostesses, by reason of his habit of continuous monologue while household duties might demand attention. One such sufferer telephoned to Mrs. Walter D. Edmonds, wife of the novelist:

"Could you come up and listen to Aleck Woollcott for a couple of hours while I get a rest?"

Mrs. Edmonds responded to the appeal and amiably gave ear while the visitor discoursed of people and events of no possible interest to her. A full ten years later Aleck called up Walter Edmonds on long distance and got Mrs. Edmonds. There was a pause; then:

"I wonder if you remember me? This is Aleck Woollcott. You used to come and listen to me in Clinton when no one else would."

Mrs. Edmonds, who had hitherto observed no signs of undue humility in the speaker, was both astonished and touched.

Rival loquacities wore upon his spirit. Of Oscar Levant he complained, "Talking to Oscar is like fighting a man who has three fists instead of the regulation two."

Levant had been invited to Bomoseen. He spent one night and fled incontinently after breakfast, unable to stand the vocal competition of the meals whereof Alice Duer Miller slyly remarked:

"There is never a dull—or, at least, an unoccupied—moment while Aleck is at the table."

Aleck could talk well, often luminously, upon any subject, but his favourite topic was himself and his experiences. Learning that Franklin P. Adams was about to take a professional step which many of his friends deprecated as reckless, Aleck rushed to a telephone.

"Don't do anything until I talk with you. I'll be right over."

He came and for three hours held forth without a break—about his own problems, not his friend's. When, at long length, there was a pause,

And silence, like a poultice, came  
To heal the blows of sound

Adams said mildly, "Aleck, I don't know how to thank you for the interest you take in me."

Aleck stared at him for a moment. His face worked.

"God! What a self-centred son-of-bitch I am!" he muttered.

His torrential verbiage, on the occasion of his first meeting with James M. Barrie, so intimidated the shy and modest Scot that he refrained from answering any of the American's subsequent letters lest he bring upon himself a second visitation. Writing to Mrs. Newton D. Baker, Woolcott regretfully recalled:

I went there intending to note Barrie's every syllable for subsequent relation to my grandchildren. I was so excited by the sheer eventfulness of meeting him that I talked a blue streak and in the two hours and a half I was there he never got a word in edgewise. I will say that once or twice he tried to interrupt, but I struck him down.

Secretary Baker was, himself, a victim. For the opinion of no other contemporary American did Woolcott have so respectful a regard, yet, after travelling all the way to Cleveland to listen to the statesman, Mr. Baker did the listening and his visitor the talking. "I got started and he could not break in with an axe," Woolcott recalled after the other's death.

U. S. Supreme Court Justice Frankfurter sustained a like ordeal with fortitude. Alice Duer Miller had brought them together in her drawing-room under the impression that she was doing a favour to both. Professor Frankfurter (as he then was) never had a chance. Hardly awaiting the introduction, Aleck launched into a disquisition upon crime with special reference to its legal aspects, a subject about which the other, who was a leading member of the Harvard Law School faculty, might have been supposed to have ideas of his own.

Aleck told him all about it; he talked and talked and talked, while the hostess's face grew blanker and blanker. When, in a final whirlwind of verbiage, Aleck finally left, the Solon felt no special desire to repeat the experience. In fact, he was far from delighted to receive a call from the determined conversationist at Cambridge. It was another Woollcott, modest, receptive, wishful to listen, to hear all about Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, at whose knees Felix Frankfurter had absorbed legal learning. From that time the two men got along swimmingly, though Aleck, by his own account, still carried the verbal ball. He wrote me shortly before his death:

I am just back from a most stimulating week-end with Justice Frankfurter. There are four or five men around the country whom I look upon as my teachers, just as the youths of Villon's day sat at the feet of the Gamaliels at the University of Paris. This creditable programme always goes on the rocks with Felix because he finds me entertaining and so incites me to talk that he hardly gets a word in edgewise.

Frankfurter took the amiable view that Aleck's passion for talk was merely a symptom and evidence of his gusto for life in general.

Silence on the listener's part, if interpretable as insensibility to the charms of his own eloquence, Aleck took sorely amiss. At a dinner party at the Gerald Brooks's he was seated next to Ethel Plummer, whose talent as an artist was not expressed in her shy and reserved personality, unless one knew her well. When Aleck, pausing for breath or a mouthful, looked expectantly at her, she had nothing to say. He stood it until the salad course, when he whirled upon her and created a startling diversion by yelling at the top of his voice:

*"Shut up!"*

Alice Miller decided that whether you considered him a good talker depended upon whether you, yourself, wanted to talk or listen, and to Dave Wallace of Algonquin fame is attributed the reflection, "The other party to a Woollcott dialogue is always the stooge."

Booth Tarkington diagnosed his reaction to the Woollcott visits by saying that Aleck's conversation "... fascinated you, kept you strung up while with him. His departure brought a released but vacant feeling—willingness for it to last a good, long while, after the lapse of which the prospect of a new meeting became a bright one."

Yet there were rare times when the verbose flood dwindled to a bare trickle, and Woollcott would sit through a whole evening contributing

little more than a grunt to the proceedings. He signed one letter "The Gregarious Recluse and Chattering Trappist."

One of Aleck's admirations was a vigorous old autocrat, Miss Cornelia Gray Lunt, who held court in her Evanston, Ill., mansion, and to whose levees "everybody who is anybody" came at command. It was her superb custom, when a communicable idea popped into her head, to ring a small bell.

"Into the startled and obedient hush she would then toss a word of welcome, an epigram, a bit of gossip, or whatever else may have just occurred to her. When she had said her say, she would graciously ring the bell again as a signal that general conversation might be resumed."

The idea appealed mightily to Aleck. He toyed with it as a useful expedient, for Bomoseen, for example, where the dinner conversation threatened sometimes to get away from him. At first the device could be introduced semi-humorously; thence making its way as an acceptable joke, it might well establish itself as a custom. On consideration, however, he gave up the notion, or, rather, postponed it. When he reached Miss Lunt's age, it might be feasible. Miss Lunt was ninety-one.

What began as an amiable habit developed with indulgence into something perilously close to a psychopathic condition, a nervous affliction, a species of logorrhea of which he was uneasily cognizant. Afflicted by one of his outbreaks of chain talking, Neysa McMein said gently, "What's the matter, Woolc? Don't you want to hear me?"

He looked at her haggardly. "I don't know what's wrong. I hear myself going on and on and on and I can't stop."

To another friend he confessed, "One day I shall probably talk myself to death." But this is under suspicion of being an artful lead-up, for he followed it with a knowingly delivered "smarty":

"He that lives by the word shall perish by the word."

Like other survivors of the Algonquin Round Table he was incurably addicted to the wisecrack, "pointed" for public appreciation. "I have reached that pathetic state where I have to drop notes to people telling them the bright things I've said lately," he wrote to Wolcott Gibbs.

Neither age, eminence, nor helplessness exempted one from the Woolcott passion for continuous discourse. If there was one person whom Aleck held in affectionate reverence, it was the lovely and gentle Laura E. Richards, whom he celebrated with voice and pen. Shortly

before her ninetieth birthday, he made a trip to Maine, to call on her. The call was a monologue, one of Aleck's most fluent and continuous. It left Mrs. Richards exhausted, as the visitor, carried away by his own eloquence, recognized too late. He wrote in distressful remorse to her daughter, apologizing for "that disastrously telescoped day on which I . . . passed through your mother's gentle house like a tasteless hurricane."

Mrs. Richards's own commentary is classic in its simplicity and comprehensiveness:

"I find Mr. Woollcott a difficult man to interrupt."

## 28

### UNDER SEPARATE COVER

WOMEN came and went in Alexander Woollcott's life. Several came and stayed. They were important in the pattern of his existence, influential in his thinking and doing; none of them was essential. *Plaisir d'amour*, which, on good poetic authority, lasts but for the moment, was for him little warmer than friendship; *chagrin d'amour*, which, on the same authority, endures throughout life, lost him few nights' sleep. In what follows, I employ the term "in love" as a convenience and an approximation.

To Neysa McMein he said, "I'm thinking of writing the story of our life together. The title is already settled."

"What is it?" she asked, as was intended.

"*Under Separate Cover*."

As a summary of their relationship, it was the perfect title. With equal accuracy it might have been applied to all his other amorous involvements. His advances did not go beyond a handshake.

None of those upon whom he set his unimpassioned affections was in love with him or pretended to be. Of most of them it can be said that they were by turns warmly devoted to him and hotly infuriated at him, for he was a difficult and erratic suitor. The letter which follows is so typical of his relationships that it might have emanated from any one of a dozen other feminine sources.

I feel terribly about what happened last night, and I'm sorry and ashamed of having spoken as I did. What I said was true (remember, for instance, our argument over ——) but I shouldn't have said it. You are so tender and sensitive, yourself, that I can't reconcile these speeches with you. However, you are so dear to me that I would crawl across Fifth Avenue on my hands and knees before I'd let anything happen to our friendship. Forgive me and let's pretend it didn't happen.

In moments of disillusion and cynicism he referred to his alienated lady loves as "abandoned playgrounds."

More than one of these associations might conceivably have developed into marriage of a sort but for the legal impediment of a husband in the case. From the time he was in a financial position to maintain a household, he evinced serious sentimental interest almost exclusively in women already married. Whether this was chance or caution is anybody's guess. It is at least significant that his solidest feminine friendships were those into which the sex element did not enter: with Alice Duer Miller, Dorothy Parker, and, while she lived, Alison Smith Crouse. Until their irremediable quarrel, Edna Ferber belonged in this category.

For a time after the war he exhibited a tendency to vaunt himself as having been a very Casanova while in France, a claim received with impolite incredulity by his companions of those days. Later he deprecated sex; it was a mere bodily function; to try to ennoble it was "bestial." In a discussion with Murdock Pemberton he set forth his creed: the only sex-relation permissible to a rational male should be with a waitress or someone of that class like the girl in Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. Because of its treatment of the sex complication, the novel was, in Aleck's estimation (for the moment), the greatest in the language.

The course of Aleck's true loves (all of them were true enough while they lasted) presents a zigzag pattern. He fell in love easily and painlessly. There was no time in his adult life when he was not wistfully and purposelessly enamoured of some charmer. To one of his inamoratas he said morosely:

"I have never seen a beautiful woman walk downstairs without proposing to her at the top and being refused before she reached the bottom."

In actual performance he was less definite than in fancy. His "proposals" seldom went further than a blandly hypothetical or lightly



humorous discussion as to the feasibility of clearing the way by divorce, or, in more impassioned moments, an imaginative outline, couched in choice and literate phrases, of what life together might be in some roscate but unspecified future.

In his attentions he was something less than the *preux chevalier* of romance. An exasperated flame of his newspaper days aired her grievances in a complaint which so tickled him that he incorporated it into his Sunday *Times* page:

Going to the theatre with you is, anyway, the most complete and skilful way of not seeing you I've discovered. I meet you at the theatre immediately after the curtain rises. Between the first and second, second and third, third and fourth (if four) acts, you flee up the aisle, leaving me to appear as unconcerned and sheltered as I can, stuck out in the third row, centre, second seat. One has to be an Alice Adams to achieve the effect. Directly the play is ended, you dash for the street, leaving me to follow or to struggle into my wraps as best I can. Outside the theatre I am hurried into a taxi (for which I pay) and am sent home alone. During the evening, my entire association with you has consisted in the consciousness of a vague bulk intermittently occupying the seat at my right. Is that going to the theatre, I ask you, or is it bartering one's womanhood?

To scores of women he was "dearest," "darling," "love," and other superficially amorous appellations, but it must be remembered as a corrective that his was the supercharged verbal environment of the theatre and the arts, where a letter which would hale a banker into court on a breach-of-promise charge is no more than the current exchange of friendship, real or pretended. If anything approaching the fervour of a genuine love letter ever issued from the facile Woolcott pen, the fortunate possessor of the rarity is presumably keeping it in her boudoir. The bounds of his sentimentalizing, as committed to paper, did not go beyond reminiscent musings on moonlight, or some such jejune declaration as "I'm intuitive about you. I know whether you're happy or unhappy, hundreds of miles away." Or, to another, "I have a sense of understanding you as I understand nobody else." It may be noted apropos that there is little if any sex sentiment in his published writings.

In the cant of the track, Aleck was a good picker. All of the objects of his devotion were women of charm, though of highly diverse types. It would be invidious to say that most of them were persons of distinction. To attempt a chronological record of his attachments would be like taking a snapshot of a kaleidoscope. The pattern was con-



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tinuously varying, overrunning, intermingling. Whether he was in love with Lilly Bonner and Bea Kaufman at the same time; whether his fondness for Ruth Gordon ran parallel to his passion for Neysa McMein, how far or at what period Eleanora von Mendelssohn ousted Grace Eustis from his heart, or vice versa, I shall not be so venturesome as to guess. Indeed, I strongly doubt whether Aleck himself, if put to the question, could have unravelled the cross-stitch.

On the testimony of his intimates, the involvement which struck deepest and lasted longest was his feeling for Neysa McMein. As has been told, he did actually plan to marry her. From the day of his disappointment at finding himself too late, to the end he was never able to exorcize her spell. "We were under each other's skins," she says, and, as would seem logically to follow that condition, they proved a mutual and at times unendurable irritant to one another. They quarrelled bitterly, made up, quarrelled again, yet were never wholly alienated; probably never could have been. Such as it was, and in its singular kind and degree, it was a life-time attachment.

His devotion to Ruth Gordon was of a less stormy nature. She was hardly more than a child—a very pretty child—when he first saw and praised her on the stage, as Lola Pratt, the devastating siren of Tarkington's *Seventeen*. While she was married to Gregory Kelly, who was not only a rising young actor but a singularly fine and winning character, it would be difficult to say which one of the pair held the higher place in Aleck's heart. After Kelly's death, Aleck's attitude towards the widow became more than friendly. She had risen to stardom, and, not content with that, branched into literature via the then Boston-Brahministic *Atlantic Monthly*. Whether or not they were ever formally betrothed is a matter of doubt, in which Miss Gordon herself apparently shares. It was a parallel case with that of Jane Grant, verging, on Aleck's part, through self-doubting hesitance to fluctuant assumption. This much, at least, can be said of the relationship, that it was rooted in a strong, honourable, and lasting affection.

Miss Gordon, herself a noncombatant by disposition, was not immune from the Woollcott tantrums. Luck of the draw made her his partner at a four-handed cribbage game, in his Campanile apartment. Being in a state of some nerve strain at the time, she made an error which brought her a rebuke from across the table. Soon after she repeated the slip, forestalling his righteous wrath by a hasty and gentle apology. But when the same thing recurred for the third time, her

partner rose, glared upon her with a face of demoniac wrath, and stalked away. The crash of his bedroom door put an end to the evening's play. Poor Miss Gordon remarked tearfully and not without justification that it was a queer way to treat a woman with whom you pretended to be in love.

Characteristically he forgot all about it and reverted to his devotions.

When she fell in love with the brilliant young Hollywood director, Garson Kanin, and some of her friends deprecated the match because of the disparity in age, Aleck showed himself the stoutest supporter of the projected marriage, so effectually forwarding it that the groom wrote him a letter of warm appreciation. There may have been something in Howard Dietz's theory that Aleck would first think hopefully of himself in the character of Benedict, and, when displaced, would cheerfully accept the *deus ex machina* role of Cupid.

Objects of the Woolcott addresses were apt to be in a condition of constitutional dubiety as to their status, though on one point they were quite clear; that no faintest breath of impropriety ever marred the placid surface of the relationship. I once nerved myself to ask one of the reputed flames, who prefers to be unidentified in the matter, whether there was no suggestion in the Woolcott advances of something beyond the Platonic. She gave the question conscientious thought before replying: "You've got the wrong sponsor. Plato wasn't the presiding genius of Aleck's loves. It was Abelard."

Both Beatrice Kaufman and Lilly Bonner were, in their own minds, good companions and no more towards their admirer. That he humorously toyed with the notion of marrying "Bea," provided she could shuffle off George (which she had no intention of doing), has been indicated earlier. With Paul Bonner's wife he could have entertained no such hope. It is difficult to place her, otherwise than by the mildly objectionable term of "society woman," which is inadequate and would certainly fail to explain Aleck's attachment. She and her husband were considerable figures upon the European social scene before it was obliterated in fire and blood, as well as in their own country. That may have had some slight influence, but I think that Aleck's fondness was based more upon her quiet intelligence and intellectual adaptability.

When, in 1936, the newspapers announced without authorization the betrothal of Grace Bustis, the second Mrs. Hendrick Bustis then divorced, to Aleck, he was more disturbed than she, since she never had considered that an engagement existed between them. He wrote

Anne Parrish that after trying to devise a tactful method of denial, he had given it up.

"I can only say," he continued, "that she might do better and I might do worse, and probably one of us will."

Except for good looks, to which Aleck was ever susceptible, Mrs. Eustis was an odd type to have taken his fancy. She was definitely of the smart and horsey set: a good shot, a dog fancier, a rider to hounds. Aleck, who knew one end of a horse from the other only for purposes of vituperation, used to jeer at her tastes, and always referred to her husband as "the groom." They had been neighbours in the apartment house at 10 Gracie Square, New York. She was much at Bomoseen, where she fitted easily into the heterogeneous community. One of the striking features of the place was that through some mysterious catalytic the most disparate social personalities combined without explosion. The reason was, presumptively, that, with a few flagrant exceptions, the guests either had the tradition of good breeding or, by varied associations, had acquired the sense of social amenity. The host, of course, was not to be relied upon. Nevertheless he was, so far as I have observed and can learn, at his best on the island.

The final picture in the Woolcott gallery of sentiment is that of Eleanora von Mendelssohn, an actress of rather classic beauty, and a descendant of the composer, with whom Aleck became acquainted when he was already well along in middle age. He met her through an inexplicable person named Rudolf Kommer, who lived on the fat of many lands without a basis of support in any reckonable way commensurate with his scale of living. Aleck celebrated, without solving, the problem in a *New Yorker* article, "The Mysteries of Rudolfo." The two men were playing chess in a Salzburg café—Aleck had already brusquely declined a Christmas invitation to his friend's island retreat—when two women entered the room, to whom Kommer presented the American, Eleanora von Mendelssohn and Elisabeth Bergner. It appeared that they were to be guests at the castle.

"This is my American friend," said the cosmopolitan. "He won't come to Schloss Leopoldskron."

"Of course I'll come to Schloss Leopoldskron," said Aleck.

He made himself agreeable throughout the visit, particularly to Miss Mendelssohn, whom he plied with insistences that she come to America.

"You'll love the United States," he said. "I'll make you love it."

Two years later, having meanwhile perfected her English to a point where, she hoped, she would be competent to understand Alexander Woolcott's, she did come over. Her education in Americanism began at his hands. He laid out her reading; he showed her pictures of desert and mountain, prairie, rivers, and lakes, all to the end of stimulating her interest in the new country; he took her on his lecture tours, and insisted upon her attendance at his broadcasts. Their relationship was that of devotion on her part and of something like dependency on his. In his last bad slump of health and courage, she came to the island to act as a sort of volunteer nurse and companion, even to the extent of massaging away the numbness of arms and legs which afflicted him. There was no engagement nor thought of engagement between them. Their association attained its climax when Miss Mendelssohn became a citizen of the United States.

Marriage as a refuge from loneliness was constantly in his mind as he approached fifty. Invariably caution prevailed over an ambition that was never more than a wistful hope.

"If any of the women to whom he was so devoted," says one of his intimates, "had shown any real inclination to marry him, Aleck would have been enormously flattered and so scared that he would have caught the first boat for Europe."

Any such union must have been one of friendship only. What little sexual capacity he may have possessed at an earlier stage was now gone. For several years he had given strong hints of this to his friends. He put it in writing, with light jocularly, in a letter to a woman friend, accompanying a pack of washable playing-cards.

"Personally I prefer washing my hands instead of the cards. I never soil cards because my hands are always pure, like my thoughts. Then, too, I am impotent."

One of his women friends observed that if Aleck ever did marry, it would be to have someone to talk to in bed.

Lovers' quarrels were so frequent in his career that one of his friends ascribes them to his attempts to whip up his torpid passions by this form of excitation. How many times he and his Neysa were at war, not even she can tell. Their worst estrangement lasted for months. He spatted with Grace Bustis over one of his more vehement political diatribes on the air, which she criticized as unfair, and withdrew into the sulks and the silences for some months before extending an olive branch in the form of a picture card portraying a jackass braying into

a microphone. With Beatrice Kaufman he was often on terms for which belligerency is a no more than adequate term.

The pathetic sense of a major frustration obsessed him. He told George Backer that he had missed the boat; that his years since 1920 had been mislived. He ought to have married, he said, but because of a "disillusionment" he had lost his path in life. One might ascribe this disillusionment to the abortive matrimonial attempt upon the already married Neysa McMein Baragwanath, but that the 1920 date is too early. If there was any damaging disappointment in that year, the victim shrouded it in an impenetrable secrecy, which was contrary to his usual habit of making something of a pageant of his bleeding heart.<sup>1</sup>

He would dearly have loved to have had children.

"Nineteen times a godfather; never a father," he wailed.

It is easy to read between the lines of his letters about the young the wistfulness of thwarted paternity, whether they are couched in his sorrow for the death of Duncan Saunders or in the jollity of his birthday greeting to the small son of Crosby Gaige:

My dear Master Jeremy:

In case you decide to retain this father whom you have taken on probation, let me strongly advise that you let your dealings with him be limited by the boundaries of Watch Hill. Such a policy might mean that you yourself would never put foot across those boundaries. I can imagine a sorrier life.

In my day, I have seen many a farm. But none I think, so lovely as yours, none so fondly modelled by Our Lord's hand. Whichever way you look, north, east, south, west, you see exciting beauty. And it will never grow monotonous. Each month, each day of each month, the scene-shifters are busy. For example, I call your attention to the great transformation effect that is managed each October in the little valley that lies to the south-west of your house. When the shrubbery is deflowered and the fall winds strip the branches clean, quite suddenly those forgotten crossroads leap at you and so much has happened since last you saw them that you hardly recognize them. Why, for one impious moment, you criticize them as out-of-drawing.

But I meant to write about your old man. In the city, you would not know him. There a thousand and one pollutions disguise him as a fellow of sharp practices and second-rate associates. But when he shuts up his desk and starts for home, a change sets in, for the farm is an alchemist. As he approaches it, with

<sup>1</sup> Danton Walker thinks that the blind reference may have been to Lola Fisher, a fascinating young actress of whom, in one of his critical splurges, Woolcott wrote: "And if you don't go to see her, you are quite, quite mad." She died twenty years ago.



every step he grows less and less like some business cronies named Shubert and more and more like an old Skunk Hollow neighbour named David Harum. Note, as he comes along the garden path, how his gait changes to the roll and dip of one who, in youth, has walked much in the soft earth behind a plough. His very speech changes. In New York, he thinks a minute and then says, "Maybe." At Watch Hill, he thinks three minutes and then says, "Mebbe."

Now let me tell you this, Master Jeremy: You stick to the one that says "Mebbe."

No more, at present, except wishes for a very happy birthday.

Alexander Woollcott.

For his own happiness Aleck should have taken Al Getman's advice (non-professional) and married a widow with a brood of ready-made children.

Weddings among his associates he resented, as impinging upon that proprietary claim which he sought to establish upon those close to him. In this respect *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is an unpleasantly faithful portrayal. He was quite capable of plotting to break up a match which interfered with his convenience. Instinctively he felt a resentment towards marriage as an institution which was not for him. News of an engagement was bane in his ears. He would hear that one of his old-time comrades was betrothed.

"To whom?" he would snap.

"To So-and-so."

"That peasant! Why, she's slept with every man west of Hoboken."

The lady in the case might be of irreproachable virtue. She might be quite unknown to her traducer. His resentment would, nonetheless, take the same slanderous form. Sometimes the report would drift back to the couple, and another friendship would dissolve.

Only in rare cases did he like both husband and wife. When he did, he still preferred them apart, holding that he got more out of each of them separately. His invitations to Bomoseen were strategically disposed to this end. He would write:

"If you feel that you must bring Tim" (the husband) "along, there is plenty of room. But I'd rather have him later. Or him now and you later."

The Alfred Lunts (Lynn Fontanne) were the only married people in the world whom, by his own statement, he enjoyed together as much as apart.

His expression of preference could be brutal:

Tell C—— he is still the bright apple of my eye. You need not tell him, however, that mamma is just a little more than I can bear. If he brings her along, the next time he dines with me, I'll shoot her. Christ! What a loathsome woman!

The aspersed wife was, of course, not a "loathsome" woman at all; nor did Aleck really deem her so. In fact, she never knew that he disliked her—or quite possibly never thought about it one way or the other—and they subsequently became passable friends.

When Dorothy Parker married Alan Campbell, Aleck threatened to go into mourning for American literature. An associate a year later called his attention to the fact that the marriage was a palpable success.

"Of course it is," he returned with a wry facc.

"Then what's all the fuss about since she's happy?"

"Happy! Happy!" he snorted. "What about *me*? I haven't read a damn thing of hers that's worth while since she married him. That bird sings only when she's unhappy."

He changed his mind when her superb and compassionate "Soldiers of the Republic" appeared in *The New Yorker*. Marriage and happiness had not ruined her, after all! He republished the little tribute to the fighting Spanish Loyalists in pamphlet form at his own expense, declaring it, with his customary addiction to extremes of opinion, to be "better than Tolstoy or Stephen Crane." In more tempered mood he said, "Certainly it comes nearer to telling the reader exactly what she is like than anything else she ever wrote."

Had the glandular attack of his early manhood left him wholly neutral, those pathetic hopes and hesitancies would not have been present to plague and bewilder him. A blind man does not strain to see. Until his last decade he was not totally sexless. In the opinion of one of his oldest friends, "he had a profound, overpowering sense of personal deficiency with regard to sex interest and impulse. Something was very wrong, or he was convinced that it was."

Yet there was enough of a remnant to give him a faint, long-lingering hope; a rare and temporary flush of triumph. He cabled exultantly from Cannes to a woman confidante in New York, "Her name was Renée."

The recipient needed no key. He was announcing a *fait accompli* in the realm of sex.

What I have now to say, I must preface with the statement of my

own profound conviction of its truth, backed by the opinions, unanimous upon the essential point, of a score of the men who knew Alexander Woollcott best, not all of them by any means friendly to him. It is a subject which I should much prefer to avoid discussing; which, indeed, I had hoped to avoid. That easy course I now see to be incompatible with my responsibilities as a biographer, as with my loyalty to and faith in a man who was my friend. Too many people have said to me, in discussing him with readily interpretable shrugs or smiles, or especially in the case of medical men, with serious scientific interest, "Of course, he was abnormal."

Alexander Woollcott was not at any time in his life a homosexual.

This is not to assert that he was normal. He was certainly subnormal after the onset of mumps, and probably before in lesser degree. There were abnormal tendencies in his childhood, a pressure of feminizing influences which unquestionably produced their dangerous effect and might, without the counterbalance of a strong character, have been permanently disastrous. He was an avid (and, of course, extracurricular) student, when in college, of Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and the Oscar Wilde scandal. That his mind took this direction is undeniable; but this is no uncommon phenomenon in youth of college age, and is, in most cases, no more than prurient curiosity, later sloughed off. So, I believe, it was with Woollcott.

He did, however, remain supersensitive in this direction. After he had become a conspicuous figure of the lecture circuits, Harold W. Thompson introduced him to a State College for Teachers audience in Albany with a sketch of his varied activities, including his undergraduate success in feminine "leads." It was, of course, done with no intention of offence. The lecturer came forward, his face suffused, his eyes glaring. Flinging his arms wide as he advanced, he squalled: "Look at me, boys and girls: half god, half woman!"

A man who knew him intimately from his early manhood, and even made something of a study of him, sends me this thoughtful estimate:

"I have other grounds (none scandalous) for feeling pretty certain that Aleck was a definitely pathological type; that he was entirely conscious of it—knew all about it; that he accepted it as his lot, made the best of it, rose above it; that he kept himself in order, and led—throughout—a private life which even the straitest-laced Puritan would have admitted was blameless. The more honour to him!"

And a distinguished psychiatrist thus sums him up: "In view of his

whole life, he is an outstanding example of what to do with an abnormal inclination."

In closing—and abandoning henceforth—this phase, I wish to emphasize again the salient fact that of all the men who knew Aleck well, there is not one who would not, in the stern old phrase, put his hand in the fire for him; not one who has a doubt of his sexual rectitude.

## 29

### REWARDS AND LIMITATIONS

UNLESS I have widely missed my mark, it must be apparent by now to the reader that this is a success story approximating the Horatio Alger pattern. Alexander Woollcott is the poor boy who, by assiduity, pluck, and self-denial (together with other qualities less meritorious but more engaging), has surmounted all handicaps to become rich, respected, and eminent. As a title, *He Got What He Wanted* would be not inappropriate. How much he prized it after he got it is another matter.

He wrote me, when he was past fifty, ". . . I have never in my most buoyant moments quite admitted that this business of living was worth the candle," following up with a passage from *City Lawyer* in which a friend of Clarence Darrow's, "in a moment of temporary sanity had decided that life was not worth living" and had thereupon committed suicide.

It was not a pose. His intimate letters were singularly free of pretence. Moreover, "I never pose except in public," he said.

Bequeathing his brain to his friend, Al Getman, he accompanied the testamentary document with the sour remark, "And I hope you get more good out of it than I ever have."

The impression that he generally gave was that of a man blessed with an avid taste for living. So thought Felix Frankfurter, who, knowing him only in middle age, comments upon his gusto, his "generous, overflowing zest for life." Frank Vreeland, who was in daily association with him when the Woollcott fame was beginning to spread, uses the same phrase in identifying this feeling as a

. . . zest for life as an illusion. He enjoyed it as a stage play, That is why, I

believe, he is so fond of Dickens, because Dickens is largely illusory, with characters and situations done in high, often theatrical colours. Woolcott liked life as a spectacle in which he was a leading actor; he loved to act, not only on the stage, but off; to dress up in a Chestertonian cape when he was attending first nights, to sport that imperial, to wear a top hat whenever there was any excuse for it.

In his world of illusion he must have an audience, lest the play lose its savour for the star. This was his posing in public.

His perceptive Philadelphia teacher, Franklin Spencer Edmonds, observed that the boy Aleck found refuge from the unsympathetic association of his fellows in realms of fancy, peopled with friendly creatures of his imagination. At college, flesh-and-blood associates supplanted but could not fill the place of these first imaginary comrades. He never recovered them; they left that inner place desolate, a void unfilled. Seclusion became a kind of exile which he would go to any lengths to escape. Hence his ruthless violation of his flat-mates' sleeping hours when, in his newspaper period, he came back from the office bursting with reports of the day's activities. Pleasure in hearing himself talk was not the whole explanation. He was putting off the evil hour when he must be alone with himself.

Broadway had a byword that, rather than eat alone, Woolcott would invite the Statue of Liberty to dinner. Often people whom he hardly knew would receive a surprise, last-moment invitation from him. A Hamilton man in London, who had graduated years after Aleck's time and was at the time no more than a casual acquaintance, was astonished to hear a voice on the telephone, wistful with supplication.

"Is this you, Wallace Johnson? This is Woolcott, O-Nine. I'm here alone. Won't you come over and breakfast with me?"

He was continually enlarging his circle, and became as facile in accumulating friendships as in earning enmities, with this difference, that whereas the latter counted for little with him, he followed Polonius's precept in his friendships and grappled them to his soul with hoops of steel.

Nobody could make himself more interesting, more charming, than Woolcott when he chose to ingratiate himself, as he often did upon first sight, for he was a man of quick, though not always accurate, judgments. Against the handicap of a gross, though impressive, personality, he had the gift of making people like him, and of increasing

their liking to affection. He would meet a grand-opera star, a titled Englishwoman, or a Justice of the United States Supreme Court two or three times, and thereafter be exchanging letters on a first-name basis.

People in bulk did not interest him. He was no joiner. Rather against his inclinations, he permitted his name to be put up for membership in a conspicuous club, whence it was hastily withdrawn, snuffed out in a gale of objections. The favourable letters were as many and quite as strong in tone. It is said that in the organization's long history, no other nomination had stirred such vehement controversy. The rejected candidate was in no wise disgruntled, merely remarking that he had thought it all foolishness, anyway.

If we except the indeterminately limited Algonquin Round Table, and Neshobe, which was more of an autocracy than a club, the only group with which Woollcott identified himself was a galaxy of Sherlock Holmes addicts, in fore-and-aft caps, calling themselves the Baker Street Irregulars, who dined and plotted and deduced for a fleeting few months at a cellar eating-house in the East Forties.<sup>1</sup> Such curiously assorted make-believers as Christopher Morley, Elmer Davis, Gene Tunney, Frederick Dorre Steele, William Gillette, and Vincent Starrett exchanged opinions and theories—one was an attempted proof by indirection that the master detective had attended Oxford University, another that he was of American extraction—over their British off-the-joint cut and tawny ale.

Through an oversight, Woollcott was not invited to become a charter member. Vincent Starrett, encountering him by chance and knowing of his predilection for crime and its detection, offered to take him along as a guest. To be in character, Woollcott provided himself with a deerstalker cap and a violently checked suit, in which costume he was warmly welcomed by Morley, as Chief Gasogene, and the others. He immediately made himself the central point of the gathering, and was displaced from the limelight only when the eighty-year-old Gillette whisked off Woollcott's headgear, cocked it upon his own head, fixed a monocle in his eye, raised himself to his full height—and there, straight, lean, and alert, magically stood the veritable Sherlock Holmes. Having, in his own mind, adopted the cult, though he never attended another meeting, Aleck now appropriated it in a *New Yorker* article which displeased some of the regular Irregulars by what they

<sup>1</sup> It has recently been revived in connection with the literary resurrection of Sherlock Holmes.

interpreted as its assumption that its author was largely responsible for the movement. He wound up his treatment with a typical "Shouts and Murmurs" snapper, to the effect that when Gillette acted in a one-act Holmes thriller of his own authorship, presented in London, the "little, frightened, underfed, sixteen-year-old comedian" who played Billy, the Buttons at Mrs. Hudson's establishment, was Charles Spencer Chaplin.

The ingenuous mummery of the Irregulars stimulated in Woolcott the same romanticism that had inspired him to haunt Germantown's street corners in the fond hope of being kidnapped à la Charley Ross. It grew with the years and was embodied in his library, of which David H. Beetle, in his *Harper's*<sup>1</sup> article, "Lavender and Old Torsos," says:

"It is an obscure and sorry murder-defendant, indeed, that failed to make the Woolcott library. Landru, Loeb and Leopold, Lizzie Borden, the Borgias—they're all there."

Lizzie Borden was Aleck's favourite. It delighted him that the erudite and unworldly Edmund Gosse nursed an unholy passion for everything connected with that grisly slaughter, and was given to reciting with gusto in his cultured and precise speech of the nineteenth-century educated Englishman:

Lizzie Borden took an axe  
And gave her mother forty whacks;  
When she saw what she had done  
She gave her father forty-one.

Aleck would rather have had two hours' talk with the grim spinster than with any other contemporary in the world. Perhaps he cherished the dream of trapping her into admission. Bitter was his disappointment when a proposal to bring the combined intellects of the Baker Street Irregulars to bear upon the mystery, with a view to determining how Sherlock Holmes would have handled it, met a cold reception. His last attempted contribution to Bordeniana was equally fruitless. When the Borden Milk company's prize-winning cow produced offspring in public at the World's Fair, Alexander Woolcott was present, and scandalized the officials with his insistence that the heifer be named Lizzie Borden.

As a logical inspiration of his attendance upon the Holmes litanies, Woolcott wrote a murder-mystery short story, his only essay in fiction,

<sup>1</sup> May 1944.

so far as is known, since his college days. It is a dreary composition. The man who could irradiate any subject which he treated with the irresistible appeal of human interest was totally incapable of investing either a plot or its persons with reality. There is a popular superstition to the effect that any product of a well-established author, no matter how inferior, is acceptable to all editors. Woollcott, at the time of this minor venture, was one of the highest-paid writers in the world. Not a magazine would touch the story; it was just too dull and inept.

No such small failure could impair Aleck's belief that he possessed natural detective powers. He took delight in pointing out to his friends that the popular fictional detective, Nero Wolfe, was obviously patterned after his rotund self. He congratulated Rex Stout, the creator of the character, upon the faithfulness of the portraiture, which considerably surprised Stout, to whom it was all a new idea.

Not only was Aleck, in his inspired imagination, potentially a great detective; he could, he believed, have been an equally successful criminal. To some of his fellow sleuths he proposed a test: he would bet five hundred dollars even that, given twelve hours' start, he could vanish from human ken and remain undetected for three weeks. All the resources of modern investigation were to be available to the pursuers. Their quarry would agree not to leave the United States. Who would take it up?

Nobody did. Yet the odds would seem to have been heavy against the fugitive, if only because of his notable physique. He stood five-foot-eight in his stockinged feet, and weighed two hundred and forty-two pounds. His facial appearance was, to put it conservatively, unusual. The remarkable globularity of his face was emphasized by large glasses, giving him a singularly owlish aspect. Even without the eccentricities of dress which he affected, he was a figure to attract instant attention and to cling to the memory. He could, of course, have discarded his conspicuous apparel, but that would not have rendered him inconspicuous. Nothing would, short of invisibility. What method of concealment he had devised, he did not confide to anyone, but he was sorely disappointed when his challenge failed.

If Woollcott demanded much from his friends, he gave in fuller measure than he received. He took a profound and, I think, rather regal delight in his generousities. To be a special guest of his was an excursion in spendour. He would invite an old friend—Lucy Drage, for example—to come to New York, accompanying the suggestion with a



cheque for railroad accommodations. If he was feeling flush, as was likely to be the case, these might run to a drawing-room both ways. The Presidential Suite at the Biltmore would be awaiting her, hospitable with flowers and fruits. Aleck's own car or, if that were in use, some other luxurious limousine with chauffeur would be at her daily disposal.

What in New York did she specially wish to see? It could easily be arranged. Every night there was the theatre, and many afternoons. After the show Mr. Woolcott's friend would be taken backstage, there to meet and be made much of by the principal performers. Elaborate dinner parties and no less elaborate breakfasts helped to keep time from hanging heavy. Two or three weeks of this—and the solicitous host considered anything less a niggardly stay—was calculated to surfeit any but the hardest spirit.

On a London trip he had struck up a friendship with the British novelist, Marie Belloc Lowndes. She remarked casually that she was thinking of coming to New York in the spring; could he recommend a quiet and inexpensive hotel.

"Hotel?" said he. "Nonsense! My apartment isn't in use half the time. You'll find it much more comfortable than a hotel."

Protest was wasted breath. Upon her arrival she was met at the boat by Aleck's secretary and transferred to the luxury of the Campanile. Part of the time her host was out of town. Every morning, the secretary called in person to make sure that she wanted for nothing and to arrange for theatres and other amusements. Aleck's friends were pressed into the service to give dinner parties and week-ends. Mrs. Lowndes did, indeed, find the Campanile more comfortable than a hotel, though it hardly met her original specification of "quiet."

Presents were a source of lively pleasure to him, given or received. He was strong on anniversaries and Christmas. His list for the latter was large and changeable. He expected reciprocity. To a theatrical friend he addressed a plaintive reproach:

"Here I've been sending you Christmas presents for years, and what do I get out of you? A damned, lousy, two-for-a-quarter card!"

He held all birthday, Christmas, and greeting cards in special detestation, disparaging them as the makeshift of shirkers too stingy to give a present or too lazy to write a letter. He would passionately chuck them into the waste-basket without so much as looking to see from whom they came. Special gifts, and more particularly such as

were distinguished by a traditional interest, were treasures to his heart. Mrs. Belloc Lowndes picked up in London and sent to him an old penknife on which were engraved the initials C.D. and M.H. It was a keepsake from Mary Hogarth to Charles Dickens. Aleck always carried it as a luck piece. Ned Sheldon's flock of carrier pigeons, sent to Bomoseen, were something to boast of to every guest.

He could be as lavish towards himself as towards others. When a spasm of extravagance possessed him, there was no limit to his indulgence. Strolling along Fifth Avenue after a bout of dentistry, when he had reached the supposedly discretionary age of fifty-two, he entered a bookshop, began to buy, and kept on buying everything he could think of and after that everything the gratified salesman could think of; resumed his ramblings until a window display caught his eye, whereupon he entered and purchased three sports suits, two pairs of athletic shoes, and a green straw hat of such startling inappropriateness that the clerk's conscience moved him to a mild remonstrance which was ill-received. His appetite whetted, Aleck then invested in a brilliant yellow Cadillac car (cancelled by the prudent Hennessey next morning) and a French poodle, and called it a day. Subsequently he attributed his prodigality to the dentist's novocain. But he had run much the same kind of financial amok before, without the incitement of any drug.

To charge him with extravagance was to meet with a denial of bland and limpid innocence. That infinite capacity for self-deception which is part of humanity's protective armour was highly developed in Aleck on the side of financial unconsciousness. Doubtless he sincerely believed himself when he wrote to Cyril Clemens, accepting the medal of the Mark Twain Society, that he had "always travelled light through this world"; he whose joyous progress for ten years past had been something between a Roman emperor's triumph and a four-ring circus!

Gambling was a passion with him. On a short railroad trip—New York to Philadelphia, for example—he would engage a drawing-room and invite three friends to come along at his expense for purposes of bridge. If he lost, it was not the money that afflicted him so much as the wound to his pride. Playing for inconsiderable stakes or for none at all—I have seen him turn morose over being worsted at stakeless anagrams—he was still a hard loser.

Victory did not necessarily mollify him. He cleaned out Walter

Duranty at bezique in the days when the famous correspondent was an impecunious reporter in Paris. When the loser timidly suggested a two-franc loan for cab-fare, Aleck became the steely-eyed gamester.

"I won that money fairly, Duranty," said he in clipped accents, "and I keep it as I won it."

It is curious to find him with a penchant for practical jokes, which, however, never quite became a habit. His practices in this line were not malevolent, but they were sometimes unbelievably jejune. Bomo-seen was temporarily enlivened—or perhaps depressed would be the more accurate term—by an outbreak of those jocular mechanics advertised in the low-grade mail-order magazines: sore-finger jokes, false warts, imitation spiders and cockroaches, sneczing roses, snoring cigars, and the like. Aleck had ordered them from a catalogue.

John Mason Brown tells in the C.B.S. magazine, *Talks*, of a disappointment suffered by Moss Hart at the hands of the jocular Woolcott:

One day Mr. Woolcott telephoned Mr. Hart.

"Moss," said he, "I am starting my lecture tour to-morrow night in Newark. Why don't you drive me over in your car and take me for dinner?"

"Aleck," replied Mr. Hart, "I'd be delighted to, but what do I get out of this? After all, I've co-authored a play that hasn't done you any harm. I tell you what, Aleck; I'll drive you over and take you for dinner on one condition. You know I used to run the Little Theatre in Newark, and a lot of those people who used to snub me will be foolish enough in the name of culture to come and hear you speak. Now I'll go with you, if only you will let me sit on the stage and mention me as a local boy who made good." "Agreed," said Mr. Woolcott, and the next night they started off. Mr. Hart did sit on the stage. Mr. Woolcott was never in better form. He spoke brilliantly, thrillingly. Throughout his whole lecture, however, Mr. Hart's hand kept stealing towards his tie with embarrassed anticipation. You see, he was expecting at any moment to be named. But on and on went Mr. Woolcott, until at the hour's end, without ever having mentioned Mr. Hart's name, Mr. Woolcott stopped. The applause was tumultuous. Mr. Woolcott held up his hand to quell the ovation, "Ladies and gentlemen," said he, "ordinarily it is my custom at the conclusion of a lecture to answer questions, but to-night I shall dispense with this practice because I know there is only one question uppermost in all your minds and that is: Who is the strange-looking man sitting on the stage beside me?" With that, Mr. Woolcott walked off the stage, leaving Mr. Hart there still unnamed.

Asking his aid in any project exposed the petitioner to a certain risk. One of his many godchildren was the daughter of Charles MacArthur and Helen Hayes. (She was, by the way, the subject of a fine legal discrimination.<sup>1</sup>) When she was of school age, the parents, purposing to enter her in a fashionable academy, requested a letter from Aleck. He composed this appeal to the principal:

"I implore you to accept this unfortunate child and remove her from her shocking environment."

The Alan Campbells cited him to Wanamaker's as sponsor for their financial reliability, with this result.

"Mr. Alan Campbell, the present husband of Dorothy Parker, has given my name as a reference in his attempt to open an account at your store. We all hope that you will extend this credit to him. Surely Dorothy Parker's position in American letters is such as to make shameful the petty refusals which she and Alan have encountered at many hotels, restaurants, and department stores. What if you never get paid? Why shouldn't you stand your share of the expense?"

In both cases Aleck sent carbon copies to the victims, who were relieved to learn later that the originals had never been mailed.

The playboy element was strong in the Woolcott make-up. Any sort of "rag" enlisted his aid. On the sixtieth birthday of George Horace Lorimer a surprise luncheon was devised by his Chief Associate Editor, Thomas B. Costain. The recruiting of the guests was turned over to George T. Bye. He rounded up Heywood Broun, Eddie Cantor, David Freedman, F.P.A., Rube Goldberg, Alexander Woollcott, Bugs Baer, Laurence Stallings, W. O. McGeehan, and several others, and herded them on a train for Philadelphia, with the accompaniment (inevitable with such a gathering) of cards to pass the time. Broun was the heavy loser and was plunged in gloom for the rest of the day.

Considered as a social entity, the group, distinguished though it is, tends slightly to levity of spirit. The then guiding genius of *The Saturday Evening Post*, on the other hand, was known in the literary world as holding a slightly "shirty" conception of editorial sanctity. He was not altogether pleased when the invaders burst in upon him,

<sup>1</sup> Miss Hayes, compelled by the natural exigencies of her physique, was forced to withdraw from a successful play and was thereupon sued for breach of contract. The point at issue was whether her pregnancy could be legally designated as an Act of God. The producer (of the play) contended unsuccessfully that it was an act of " "

singing "Happy Birthday to You." Woolcott and Stallings perched on the editorial table, produced a set of dice, and shot craps. Ignoring the chill of the atmosphere, the others made themselves perfectly at home. After some minutes of discomfort, Lorimer, or Mr. Lorimer, as he insisted upon being called by his contributors, gave in with good grace and presided at the elaborate (Curtis State dining-room) luncheon which Costain had arranged. Although it was the era of Prohibition, the celebration was not dry.

At the dispersal, Eddie Cantor went out on Broad Street, made friends with the traffic cop, borrowed his white gloves, and directed traffic with a mixture of élan and aplomb which considerably enlivened that busy thoroughfare. Others went sightseeing and discovered an Anatomical Museum, For Gentlemen Only, Admission Fifteen Cents. They entered upon a scene already well patronized. Borrowing the proprietor's pointer, Rube Goldberg delivered a lecture on Early Landscape Art in Pennsylvania, with examples (operating the pointer) from the less publicized portions of the human frame, until the outraged owner threatened to call in the police. *Saturday Evening Post* influence kept the episode out of print, but Mr. Lorimer, it is said, did not look back upon that birthday as the most satisfactory of his anniversaries.

When the hour came for the return, several of Impresario Bye's charges failed to show up at the station. It would not have unbearably afflicted him if all of them had disappeared.

"After that passage in the For Men Only museum," he says, "I washed my hands of 'em except for return transportation, which they already had. If they didn't want to use it, that was their lookout."

Impulse guided—sometimes misguided—Woolcott to unprofitable selections. A Filipino bellboy at a hotel pleased him by his assiduity and polite manners.

"What's your name?" inquired Woolcott.

"Oliver Goldsmith, sir."

The guest gave a yelp of delight. "You're hired."

The employment did not turn out a success.

Snobbery is a charge frequently brought against Woolcott. It is easy to see how his lordly assumptions might lend colour to the accusation. Yet I think he lacked the essential quality of the snob; that is, any touch of servility in his relations with the great of the world. His contacts with prominent people, many of them quite intimate, affected

him in a very minor degree, if at all. And they certainly did not influence his writing. He tended to be reticent in this respect.

Nobody could have been better "copy" than the Franklin D. Roosevelt. He kept his pen religiously off them. When the Edward-Mrs. Simpson episode was filling the newspapers, he could readily have knocked off a personal-view article which any editor would have welcomed. I doubt whether any of the editors who knew him would have ventured to suggest it, even had they been aware of his special qualifications, which they never would have learned from him.

At the time when romantic interest in Mrs. Simpson and the King of England was keenest, a dinner-table discussion at which Aleck was present centred upon the more personal phase of that acutely political issue. Aleck, at variance with an assertive woman guest who "knew all about it from an intimate friend of an intimate friend," supported the cause of the lovers with warmth and a rather surprising familiarity with details. After dinner I asked him, "How do you know so much about it? Or don't you?"

"Oh," said he, "I dined with them a couple of times in London."

"Why didn't you say something about it?"

"It didn't occur to me."

Other sources subsequently filled out the incident. While in London in 1936, when Edward VIII was still on the throne, Aleck was invited to Mrs. Simpson's home to dine with the King. It was a small dinner, among the other guests being the Countess of Oxford (Margot Asquith) and Harold Nicolson. Aleck's evening was damaged, if not spoiled, by the superior conversational determination of Margot Asquith, who took the floor and would not be denied. Every time he caught the conversational ball and was, as he thought, free and in the open, she snatched it from his grasp and was off down the field. He could not thereafter mention her without a shudder of resentment and borrowed a term from his newspaper days to denounce her as "that space-grabber."

He was impressed with Edward's intelligent interest in social problems.

"He can be a very serious young man on serious questions," he said, adding prophetically, "That is what will get him into trouble one of these days with the Tory prigs and bigwigs."

Bennett Cerf, in his "minority report" on Woolcott in *Try and Stop Me*, tells of a previous meeting, of which I have no other record.

"In England Woolcott attended a small dinner given in honour of Edward, then Prince of Wales. He was deeply flattered when the Prince called him into private consultation after the ladies had left the room, but his elation vanished when the reason became apparent. 'Woolcott,' said the Prince, 'you've got something to do with that blasted *New Yorker*, haven't you? Well, why the devil do my copies reach me so irregularly?'"

As early as his start in dramatic criticism, accusations of bootlicking were brought against Woolcott because of his idolatry of stage stars. Frank Vreeland disposes of these:

He loved to cultivate the friendship of the great of the theatre primarily, I think, because they were the arch-exponents of a world of illusion that he loved more than anything else. I don't believe it was the ordinary sort of snobbery. He would sometimes be very rude to people who could boast only of money or social position or of achievements in fields in which he was not interested. But the people of the stage were beings apart.

It is difficult to pin an indictment for snobbishness upon a man who is affected as little by money, either his own or that of others, as by social importance or by "names." Whatever over-adulation Woolcott manifested was for intellect, charm, or achievement. He was, to a degree unsurpassed in any person of my acquaintance, indifferent to any consideration of colour, race, or class. Such distinctions simply did not exist for him. Whatever prejudices he harboured were individual and personal, not generic.

Casual acquaintances thought of him as a man of infinite resource and universal interests. He was not. For one of his high intelligence, he was singularly limited. His mind had its blind sides. His was essentially an urban intellect. Cities and the minds of men, he knew. Beyond that there were wide blanks; he passed through the world with a keen but restricted vision. Although country-born, he was both ignorant of and insensitive to nature except in its broadly aesthetic aspects. He was of those who

... walk through the fields in gloves,  
Missing so much and so much

—a poem, by the way, which he held in high esteem.

Bomoseen he loved, but of its non-human habitants he knew little. I doubt whether there were half a dozen native birds, outside of the crows who exasperated him by breaking into his conversation, that he

could identify by song or sight. A visitor, asking whether wild columbine grew there, received a blank, "How should I know?" When he found a guest examining a rare moth on the window-pane, he said in tolerant amusement: "Who do you think you are: Will Beebe?"

Yet he had a feeling for living creatures and disliked having them destroyed. There was fair shooting in the vicinity of the island. He never took part in it. Sporting friends might go after birds if they chose; he wished them ill-luck and was openly delighted when they returned with empty bag. One such group, having drawn blank for three successive days, he gleefully dubbed the Audubon Society.

He was taken to Death Valley by friends of mine, Dr. Levi F. Noble and his wife; rarely expert guidance, since Dr. Noble is the first authority on the region, having been commissioned by the U. S. Geological Survey to map it. Aleck was on his best behaviour, asking polite and uninformed questions with the prefatory warning that information should be conveyed in words of one syllable because "as far as science is concerned, my mentality is that of a small negress of six."

Upon arrival it developed that what he had really come for was to inspect the "castle" of Death Valley Scotty, built by Aleck's friend, Frank Lloyd Wright, with afflicting architectural modifications by the owner. Mrs. Noble introduced the visiting to the local celebrity.

"Who?" said Scotty, scowling.

"Alexander Woolcott. You know, the Town Crier," explained Mrs. Noble.

"Never heard of him," growled Scotty and turned his shoulder.

"I've always suspected that my vogue is ephemeral," commented Aleck equably.

Down in the grim and lifeless basin, he bestowed a perfunctory attention upon the rock formations, but presently lost interest in that incomparably weird and colourful landscape when he learned of a CCC camp in the neighbourhood. He must visit that and talk with the boys. The outcome of the call was a generous consignment of books, arriving some weeks later for the camp library. When I next saw him, I asked how Death Valley had impressed him. For a moment his expression was vague.

"Oh!" he said, brightening. "Death Valley? Of course. What delightful people those Nobles are! I'd like to see them again."

In the arts he was untaught, though of more perceptive appreciation than in the sciences. His judgment of paintings, while not invariably



orthodox, was fundamentally intelligent. Architecture interested him because of his admiration for the genius of his friend Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright made the natural mistake of believing Woollcott a connoisseur of the arts and sent him a priceless set of Hiroshigi prints which he had received as a gift from the Emperor of Japan. An informed guest at Bomoseen saw them "kicking around in a desk folder," and expostulated, pointing out that any art museum in the world would be overjoyed to have them.

"Is that so?" said Aleck. "I'd better turn 'em over to Gus Eckstein. He understands that sort of thing."

In music his tastes were incongruous. His favourite selection was "Over the Waves," with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony pressing it close. His passion for the Hamilton Choir was based, one may suspect, less on its fine technical performance than on the kudos it bestowed upon his and its Alma Mater.

Economics, archaeology, history, philosophy, and the fascinations of medical science attracted his attention only episodically. The microscope was as little known to him as the telescope. He had no illusions as to his own limitations, being, in fact, quite humble about them. The scope of John Kieran on "Information, Please!" stirred his amazement and admiration.

"How does a sports reporter get to know all those things?" he marvelled. "How does anybody?"

His own first appearance in that mental gymnasium was such as to arouse in him a dismal suspicion that he must have struck the audience as "not quite bright." Subsequently he improved upon his debut.

Biology enlisted his fitful attention. He regretted having paid so little heed to the subject in college. Familiarity with it might, he surmised, have cultural value; tend to broaden one's literary scope. It would be fun, too. See what pleasure Gus Eckstein got—and gave—out of his studies of canaries. He would get the ornithological physician to lay out a comprehensive course of reading for him. But could a man of fifty hope to accomplish anything by that sort of study? Perhaps it was too late. Anyway, where was he to find the time?

Religion concerned him more intimately. What sporadic tendencies he evinced were towards the Roman Catholic Church. Father Duffy had been one of his heroes; the Woollcott essay on that widely loved priest is in his most fervent vein. With Kathleen Norris he had often

discussed creeds, more particularly the Romanist, for she was both devout and orthodox in that faith. He was in one of his low-vitality periods when the newspaper headlines announced Heywood Broun's conversion. Aleck telephoned excitedly from Bomoseen to George Bye.

"Maybe I'll go in with him."

Broun arranged for his old friend to come to dinner and discuss it. So many other topics came up that not until the end of the evening did the convert get around to asking, "Why don't you join the Church, Aleck? I believe it's what you need."

"I'm going to think it over," promised Aleck.

It was sufficiently in his mind for him to discuss it with Thornton Wilder, who, of all his friends, was intellectually the most compatible. After his death, Wilder wrote to me:

I agree with you completely that all the essentials of "ethical responsibility" were the heart of Aleck's life, but that it had no "canal" into the traditions of religious or philosophical thinking. Four or five summers ago . . . I remember him saying that he envied, yet was cut off from any resources on which some of the people he most admired seem to draw (he instanced Father Duffy), and he proposed making some inquiry into Christian "source books." . . . He never mentioned such a need again. These last years were so filled with affirmation of an interpretation of destiny—for him—and that, rightly, was his resource.

The deeply implanted early influence of the Phalanx was too potent. After a critical and successful operation in Boston, his last hospital experience, the old, easy agnosticism wells up and we find him perpetrating an Ogden-Nashish couplet:

To all things clergic  
I am allergic.

The lyrical inspiration was his acquaintance with a fellow patient, a young priest to whom he took a liking and who presumably talked religion to him, for Aleck wrote, in impish humour, that "I almost converted him."

There were times when vague hopes stirred within him and he was moved to surmise with Darwin that there might be "more in man than the mere breath of his body." His grief over an old friend's death impelled him to write to Edmund Devol, "I shall see Alice before you do."

It was emotion, not conviction.

" " "  
" " "

Personal immortality was to him no more than the sterile hope that

We shall meet where all men meet,  
On the lips of other men.

Nor did that possibility of a vicarious life after death specially impress him. He had at all times an honest doubt whether anything he had ever done would long survive him.

Two months before his death he asked Rex O'Malley, then a guest at the island, whether he attached any importance to premonitions.

"Yes," said O'Malley, who is a professing Roman Catholic.

Aleck did not pursue the subject then. But later he told O'Malley that all religions looked to him like "heathenish superstition," adding hesitantly:

"Come back to the island sometime and talk to me about yours."

Success has been defined as the proper ratio between what one contributes to and what one derives from life. On this basis the balance is against Alexander Woolcott. He gave more than he got.

Nevertheless, I like to believe that, at the end, he would have revised the pessimistic view quoted at the beginning of this chapter and would finally have "admitted that this business of living *was* worth the candle." For the final years of a life that was always crowded and productive were crowded, productive, and purposeful. And, I am convinced, happily purposeful.

## 30

### LIFE EXPANDS AT FIFTY

CONSIDER him at the age of fifty. He has led a life that would have wrecked most constitutions ten years earlier. Self-indulgence at the table and between meals—the chocolate-cream habit—has put back most of the fat so painfully reduced by the regimen of his health retreat. His mind has toiled unsparingly; his body has remained sedentary, recalling Percy Hammond's earlier picture, "a mountainous jelly of hips, jowls, and torso [but with] brains sinewy and athletic."

Yet such is his natural equipment of health that he has come through thus far without any major physical damage.

Some thousands of people who know him only through legend hate and despise him as a spoiled child of fortune, a bully, and a boor. Some hundreds of thousands who have listened to him on the air love him as an unseen friend, a wise and kind counsellor. He has earned uncounted enmities by his gratuitous insolences and calculated insults, and won and kept the respect, admiration, and affection of a wide and diverse group, both men and women, of whose allegiance anyone might be proud. If he occasionally laments the futility of existence, it is probably because he has overeaten the night before, and his self-pity derives less from conviction than from constipation.

His is the inestimable blessing of honest creative endeavour; that of finding an active pleasure in his work. He can still play with unstinted zest. And now, at the half-century mark, he is going to taste once more the supremely joyous adventure of life. He is going back on the stage.

S. N. Behrman, author of *Brief Moment*, in which Woolcott had made his professional début seven years earlier, wrote another play with the former amateur in mind, *Wine of Choice*. The principal role was that of Binkie, an epigrammatical Jewish socialite, touched with faint mystery and known as "ambassador-at-large to the world." The chief requirement of the part was that the actor should deliver philosophic wisecracks with an *esprit du monde*. Tailored to his personality though it was, Woolcott took it upon himself to rewrite Behrman throughout the part on the ground that "his dialogue simply cannot be spoken," something of an impertinence as applied to an experienced and successful playwright. Having thus doctored it to his satisfaction, he saw himself so accurately personified that he doubted "whether the part calls for the services of an actor," and so thought himself competent to fill it.

An unpromising try-out caused a withdrawal for revision, after which Woolcott, satisfied that it was now "a fine play," took over the star part.

Neither public nor critics concurred. Their reaction was disappointing. As for the star, he fared, on the whole, better than his medium.

Brooks Atkinson wrote in *The Times*:

Except for some passionate and courageous speaking about things that matter, in the last act, it dozes agreeably in a state of suspended animation. . . . The Long Island set is more futile than the cultural worldlings he usually spins

into the gossamer net of a conversation piece. . . . As for the star, in *Brief Moment* he lounged impressively. His second attack upon the stage finds him treading the boards until they creak. You will find him in his bathrobe in the first act . . . his wardrobe steadily improving for the rest of the evening. Although his rhythms in acting have none of the liquefaction of his town crying out loud, he comes closer to being an actor than he did in *Brief Moment*.

Richard Lockridge, in the *Sun*, is for the most part in agreement:

Mr. Woolcott . . . is extraordinarily amusing, partly because he has all the best lines and partly because he gives them with the careful precision of a man who licks the full cream of every jest. He is type-cast if ever a man was. He is not, of course, an actor. . . . He confides his quips directly to the audience, possibly with the thought that this saves time and effort for everybody. And this is the brightest spot in an evening which the literate may enjoy with no fear of over-excitement. . . . It takes Mr. Woolcott several scenes to begin acting and abandon protective mannerisms, but he is always engaging to watch and just a wee bit like a captive balloon.

The *Daily News*, however, dubbed him "a third-rate actor in a fourth-rate play" and said that all that he did was to make a spectacle of himself. Burns Mantle gave opinion that he could never be more than a super-amateur. This was the estimate of his fellow players. He was a gifted outsider whose range was limited to playing himself. Beyond that he could not hope to go.

The comedy ran three months on the road, but survived the strictures of the Metropolitan critics only forty-three days.

Notwithstanding its lack of success, the star derived a lively satisfaction from it. He wired to another author-actor, Sinclair Lewis, then appearing in one of his own dramatized novels, "Greetings from one middle-aged exhibitionist to another."

As a trouper Woolcott brought variety into the life of his companions. While *Wine of Choice* was playing Pittsburgh, Behrman entered Aleck's room at the William Penn Hotel, to find him absorbed in proof-reading. The telephone rang, Chicago on the wire. Quitting his literary labours, Woolcott plunged into an impassioned harangue addressed to one "Bob," with the purpose of persuading him to become president of Hamilton. The playwright made out that Bob was President Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago. When the exhortation was over, Behrman remarked: "Well, Aleck, I've had very few actors in my plays who could switch university presidents around with quite this casualness."

"You're damned right," agreed Aleck, looking up from the work to which he had returned. "And you've had very few actors in your plays who correct *Atlantic Monthly* proofs with an eyebrow pencil."

Broadway, always as gossipy as a village grocery, grinned widely, after the show got its start in town, over a publicity stunt in reverse, a technique of which Woollcott was master. That recognized mouth-piecc of café society, Lucius Beebe, selected Actor Woollcott for the honour of an interview in his *Herald Tribune* column. Now, to be celebrated by Mr. Beebe is a patent of nobility in certain highly publicized if not over-discriminating social strata. Woollcott turned the columnist down. Mr. Beebe expressed his shock and pain in the following paragraph:

*Nose-Tilt Note of the Week*

Alexander Woollcott, once associated with something called *The World*, does not receive reporters or interviewers.

The theatrical reporters flocked backstage. What was it all about? Was it true that Woollcott had "snooted" Lucius Beebe?

"Beebe?" said Woollcott innocently. "Beebe? Why, I thought he was at the bottom of the ocean."

Result, a lively "press," which stirred up interest in the actor and the play and did the box office of *Wine of Choice* no harm.

Although he claimed "unaffected vitals" in the matter, Woollcott was sadly discountenanced when the play closed and the glory of the spotlight departed from him. He went back to the more humdrum pursuits of literature, still nursing the hope that someone, some time, somehow would write him a hit. Maybe Moss Hart would. He told Hart that I yearned some time to tour the country in a central part, so that if I could succeed in being funny it wouldn't disturb the other actors."

Eventually the interview bore fruit in the Kaufman-Hart *The Man Who Came to Dinner*.

*Wine of Choice* played Washington, while on tour, and the star was invited to Sunday supper at the White House. He had met the Roosevelts before, but quite casually. The President, who knew Woollcott to be politically sympathetic, gave him a friendly welcome. The guest was in one of his eccentric moods that evening, and after dinner, when there was piano music by a professional, sat astraddle of his chair,

staring so fiercely at the performer that Mrs. Roosevelt became apprehensive of one of those Woollcottian outbreaks which had become common rumour. At the close he signified his approval with a grunt and, when conversation became general, was all amiability. From that time he became a frequent house guest with a freedom of access which he did not hesitate to exploit on occasion.

While staying there, he dined downtown with Thornton Wilder and Paul C. Harper, Jr., a lieutenant in the Marines. Woollcott remembered Harper with amusement from an encounter some ten years before, when a solemn, thirteen-year-old schoolboy had thrust into his hands as he was about boarding a train the manuscript of an essay on "The Boy Scout Movement in Evanston, Ill.," saying:

"I'd like your opinion on this some day, sir."

The three sat late, talking; so late that the young Marine had missed the last train to his base. Quarters at the capital were available only in advance. Harper resigned himself to a night in the Pennsylvania waiting-room.

"Nonsense!" said Woollcott. "I've got two rooms. You can have one."

"That's fine," said the officer gratefully. "Where?"

"At the White House."

To demur was futile. Harper was established in a bed once occupied by Winston Churchill. To forestall a distorted version, Woollcott wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt, who was at Hyde Park:

"I wish to deny in advance the rumour which eventually must come to you, that I quartered a whole regiment of Marines in the White House during your absence. It was only one Marine."

The hostess wrote back assuring him that any time there was an empty bed it could not be better filled than by a U. S. Marine.

In the early stages of their acquaintanceship, Woollcott was inclined to ignore Mrs. Roosevelt and concentrate on the President. For her part she found him consistently amusing and stimulating. Presently his attitude changed. He conceived an unbounded admiration for her. He told Booth Tarkington that she was the greatest living woman, and that "if she came into this room we all ought to get down on our knees before her." Attacks upon her by hostile columnists roused him to something like frenzy, and he was prevented from counter-attacking with pen and voice, only by her firm prohibition.

His relations with the President were less stable. Mr. Roosevelt liked

him well enough, but fellow guests at the Executive Mansion have told me that Woolcott never seemed quite relaxed in the presidential presence.

"He was like a child who is not sure you want him in the room and self-consciously strives to please," says one of them. "He tried too hard to make a hit."

The necessity of playing second fiddle also wore upon him. Mr. Roosevelt's good stories, of which he had a store, took precedence over Woolcott's, a sore trial to the latter. He could not always hold himself down, and once incurred a quiet snub by shouting across the room, "Did you get that batch of mystery stories I picked out for you, Mr. President?"

"No," said the President. Then to the man with whom he had been talking, "I did, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of saying so here."

All Woolcott's communications were with Mrs. Roosevelt. He would write her, "I would like to come for a week or so. If you haven't room for me, there are plenty of other places for me to go. I prefer yours."

"Of course," Mrs. Roosevelt comments upon this, "the White House *is* convenient, and there aren't many places where a guest can be so free."

Once only was his self-invitation vetoed.

"I'll bet I know why," said Aleck to Jo Hennessey. "Winnie must be coming."

So it was. Winston Churchill arrived and was established in the suite habitually occupied by Woolcott.

During the Washington run of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, the star stayed at the White House and later recommended its advantages to Ethel Barrymore at a banquet in that lady's honour.

"Mrs. Roosevelt runs the best theatrical boarding-house in Washington," he asserted.

While in New York she came to the Gotham to see him. Finding him surrounded by the impedimenta of his multifarious activities, she was at first distrustful of the success of her errand, which was to enlist his aid in one of the many public causes near to her heart. Could he find place in one of his broadcasts for a mention of it? Of course, said he. As he escorted her to the elevator, she said admiringly, "I don't see how you find time for all the things you do, Mr. Woolcott."

Speechless for once, he could only stare at the author of *My Day*, that record of superhuman energy.



"I nearly pushed her down the elevator shaft," he said afterwards.

At the Hyde Park gatherings he was less happy than at the White House. In those conglomerates of politicians, neighbours, newspapermen, and distinguished guests there was little chance for him to assume and none for him to maintain the centre of the stage. Condemned to the bitterness of comparative obscurity at a lawn supper, he seized upon and glumly consumed a large bowl of raspberries designed to supply the entire table at which he was placed.

He did not make capital of his friendship for the illustrious, except, of course, the professional capital of his writings. In the case of the Roosevelts this was, of propriety, *terra prohibita*. He did, however, make one curious and amiable use of White House prestige. While staying there he would use the official stationery to write notes, not to people whom he wanted to impress, but to some of the humbler of his acquaintances—a young actress in a road company, a private in camp, an ambitious writer in a country town—on the theory that it would do them no harm to be the recipients of an envelope with the quiet block letter "The White House" upon it.

While patronizing "the best theatrical boarding-house in Washington," he met at the Felix Frankfurters' three-and-a-half-year-old Oliver Gates, son of an English barrister who had been a student of Frankfurter's at Harvard. The young refugee from the blitz had been taken in by the Frankfurters. Aleck was captivated by him. Justice Frankfurter writes:

"The simple truth is that I've never known a boy whom God has more favoured. For once, Aleck's enthusiasm was measured."

This enthusiasm incited Aleck to action. He took thought of how parents, separated by an ocean from such a child, must be longing for news—any news—any word, though it were not actually news—and so sat in to his desk and, in his fluent and slightly handwriting, composed a letter to the mother whom he did not know:

THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON

Mrs. Sylvester Gates,  
20 Lowndes Square,  
London, S.W.  
England.

December 15, 1940

My dear Mrs. Gates,

This letter, written in docile obedience to a sudden and unexamined impulse, is from a passerby (without portfolio) who happens to be visiting the present

tenants of this house—happens, indeed, to be lodged for a few nights in the room where the Emancipation Proclamation was signed—and who blandly uses their impressive writing-paper instead of his own, as a device for catching your eye.

By using a little care, a roving journalist like myself can, on any visit to Washington, meet such men from all over the world as make the visit fruitful and something to remember. This time I have done especially well because the other day, on dropping in for a twilight drink with the Felix Frankfurters, I was rewarded by what I already know was the high honour of being introduced to a dauntless and courteous young house-guest of theirs. He seemed to me a great gentleman.

If I should live to a ripe old age, one of the compensations will come some day in the form of a chance to say, in a casual manner that will madden everybody and fool nobody: "This Oliver Gates? Oh, yes, I used to know him rather well. Why, once in Washington long ago he let me help him off with his overcoat."

Yours sincerely,

Alexander Woolcott.

People have often said to me that Alexander Woolcott had in him no genuine tenderness; only affectations and sentimentalities. To these this letter, together with the one about Duncan Saunders's death, is recommended for careful reading.

Now that he was fifty, he informed an editorial solicitor, he intended to write only what pleased him and to accept no suggestions unless they struck his fancy. At the back of his head there must have been some implicit, if informulate, expectation of living another half-century, since he laid out for himself rather more in the line of professional endeavour than he had accomplished in the first half.

The book on poodles was to be the start. Then there were a couple of anthologies that he had in mind. Not content with "pinching and nudging" him, that gadfly of his literary conscience, Thornton Wilder, was helping him to gather "a magpie hoard of odds and ends about the Phalanx" for professional use. Aleck had the title for it, *Two Funerals at the Phalanx*. But that was no more than a curiosity-catch. The treatment would cover every phase of the "noble failure" and all those family figures, so much more vivid to his mind than anything in Dickens. That would be his masterpiece.

Or would it? Could he not do an even better job with the heroic figure of Associate Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, in whom he saw the first of the Supreme Court liberals? That biography was a "must."

Felix Frankfurter would never leave him in peace until he got at it. After that he could turn to his own. As it would be posthumous, he could appropriately take over the title which he had proposed to Neysa McMein, *Under Separate Cover*. Also, he might, as opportunity offered, write a farce in which he and Harpo Marx would be co-starred.

He had never abandoned his hope of a half-hour on the radio, freed from the fetters of sponsorship. Pending that, he pondered a story-telling series, one story per evening, a routine gruelling enough to test the endurance of a performer twenty years younger.

International problems took on increasing importance in his mind. He meditated assuming an editorial pen on some influential and liberal paper outside of New York, such as the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. Lively as was his rancour against Harold Ross, it could not delete the ineradicable partnership of interest in *The New Yorker*, nor the latent hope of being featured again as a contributor. At one time he had thought that he might edit the magazine. Harold Ross was not in the best of health: he might die; Aleck hoped so (in loose talk) and would probably have been shocked to the heart if he had.

"At it again!" said the old Algonquinites when a circular went around to a select list, inviting them, over the name of Alexander Woollcott, to join a new sort of dinner club with a house in the East Fifties, to be called—an unmistakably Woollcottian touch—"Elbow Room." The project was not actually Woollcott's but Joseph Hennessy's. Woollcott's part was limited to the drumbeat which rallied a roster of charter members reading like a composite of *Who's Who*, Walter Winchell, and Lucius Beebe.

The initiation fee was a modest \$25, but everything else was on a scale of magnificence. The building was reconstructed from top to bottom with decorations by Normal Bel Geddes. The prices were such as to startle even that free-spending membership.

When he viewed the establishment's splendours, Aleck murmured disappointedly that it wasn't at all what he had had in mind. He had visioned something simple and friendly and atmospheric, like the Players Club, whereas this, he complained, was enough to convince one that Herbert Swope had turned architect. (To the end of his life he could never resist what one of the Neshobe circle called "Swope-swiping," though there was no longer any rancour in his feelings.) Elbow Room died of its supercharges in six months, with no regrets by Aleck.



CTOR  
*The Man Who  
Came to Dinner*



SPORTSMAN

' All these activities predicate a sturdy constitution for a man of fifty. No casual observer would have credited Woollcott with it. Rotund, jowly, cumbrous, he said of himself that he manifested all the grace and agility of a gravid sea cow. But to see him skip about a badminton court compelled a reconsideration of physical values. He still had the digestion of an ox and the otiose capacity of a hibernating bear. Every morning at the island he got up at seven o'clock for a pre-breakfast plunge, a regimen which he maintained until after snowfall. October swimming in Bomoseen waters is a diversion not recommended to the soft-fibred.

Few men of fifty see the future as an expanding prospect. Alexander Woollcott did. That was his inestimable good fortune, the gift of the kind fates for one to whom they had not always been kind. He was to enjoy, with some depressed interruptions, five years of vigour and accomplishment, crowned at the end with the high satisfaction of a task well and gallantly performed at the imminent risk of health and life.

### 31

## NOTHING SHORT OF WAR

NOTHING short of war could have effectively lifted Alexander Woollcott out of himself. The looming threat over Europe inspired in him a craving to get in and help, that relegated self-absorption and self-interest permanently to the background. Thanks to the heritage of his Phalanx ancestry, he had always been innately public-spirited. Now he became public-minded. More than that, he became world-minded. With clear prescience he saw civilization imperilled while the vast majority of his fellow citizens were still unawakened to the fires on the horizon. From that moment of ominous enlightenment, in sickness and in health, up to the day of his death, his central activation was that of a mind enlisted in a cause.

"As I pluck at the counterpane," he wrote Alex Osborn from a sick-bed, "it dawns on me that for the next few years the business of being

an American will be a full-time job, and God knows I want to work at it!"

Two years before the first shot was fired, he saw the war coming, and was sunk in pessimism.

"At no time since 1937," he wrote Paul Bonner, "has it seemed to me probable that Britain would escape total and annihilating defeat at the hands of Hitler."

Such defeat, he believed, would be the first step towards Nazi domination of the world and Nazi destruction of everything for which the civilized and progressive nations stood. He was passionately convinced that America must make common cause with England; that in such an alliance lay the only remaining hope, albeit not too bright a one, of survival against the hosts of darkness. Here again was a renaissance of that curious and indomitable spirit of his campus days; he felt about his country as he had felt about himself; there might be a sore licking in prospect at the hands of a bigger and more powerful bully. It didn't matter. You had to do the best you could. You had to fight. He found disappointingly few of his fellow countrymen to agree with him or even to listen to him. It was just another of Aleck's effervescences.

War was still a remote contingency to most Americans, and peace their normal preoccupation, when Gilbert Seldes wrote an article in *Esquire*, railing at the *Town Crier* for a broadcast on the ground that it tended "to discourage the military mind" in growing boys. Such, in fact, was its obvious purpose. Woollcott disliked and distrusted the military mind with a conviction engendered in the World War and increasing with the years.

"I don't know whether he calls himself a pacifist," wrote Seldes.

A simple inquiry would have enlightened him on the point. Woollcott was, indeed, a pacifist, one who could find nothing but "cold hate in my heart for every part of the business" (of war); who wrote with acid apprehension of the possible day "when next our statesmen get us into war," and of the home guard, "cheering their silly and unimperilled heads off while their younger neighbours file down the street on their way to the waiting transports."

He spoke his mind about war many times and in many places, but never more effectively than in his radio anecdote about small Nancy Lewis, daughter of Lloyd Lewis, the historian, who was taken by her father to a military review. What was it for? Preparation

for war, explained Lewis. And what was war? The Town Crier went on:

Now, wars take a bit of explaining because, when you come right down to it, they don't ever make much sense. Nancy's father told her that a lot of men would dress up like that and that a lot of other men in another country would also dress up, and the two would come together and try to kill each other. This gave Nancy food for thought, and after a pensive silence she said, "Do you know what's going to happen some day?" No; her father didn't. "Well," said Nancy—a nine-year-old prophetess after my own heart—"Well," she said, "I'll tell you. I'll bet you that some day they'll have a war and nobody'll come." Oh, Nancy, I hope you're right, but I'm afraid your day is far off.

Woolcott's pacifism was logical and, to use an apparent contradiction in terms, militant. Because he hated the death and suffering, the squalor and brutalization of conflict, he hated also, and with irreconcilable bitterness, the Hitlers and Mussolinis, who for purposes of aggrandizement, were preparing to submerge the world in carnage. Thus he was ready and eager to fight for the hope of a future where no despot would dare make wars.

In his own mind Woolcott had already enlisted (in what capacity he could not yet determine, though he would have liked to get into action if it were only cleaning out a hospital ward again) when he made a trip abroad in 1938. England was only less lethargic than America. He found the English public, with dire peril overhanging as he saw it, "disposed to exercise their national genius for flying into a great calm."

The appeasers were in the saddle. Aleck's friends among the Best People, the class which by social pressure upon political action rule England with a cryptic authority incomprehensible to the American mind, thought that Hitler wasn't such a bad fellow, after all. You could do business with Hitler. He had no intention of attacking England. Why should he? Leave it to Mr. Chamberlain to handle the upstart. The American visitor found himself more worried over England than most of the Englishmen whom he knew.

Back in America he was a little uncertain about Chamberlain. As the umbrella-wielding statesman started for Munich, Woolcott found "too many of my countrymen safe behind that splendid moat we call the Atlantic, tilting back in their chairs and saying, in effect, to England and France, 'You go and tell that young man (Hitler) he can't



intimidate us.' " Perhaps Chamberlain would do the trick and the umbrella prevail over the sword.

He changed his mind soon and definitively, chafing bitterly over "the long and costly dawdling of the Baldwin and Chamberlain governments." Chamberlain he now saw as a world calamity. He tersely voiced the reaction of the thinking American public to the peace-in-our-time poltroonery:

"There is no estimating, of course, the deep lack of respect for him in millions of American minds, and the uncomfortable distrust of England because she has not divested herself of him."

To explain away that distrust, to foster community of sentiment between this country and England to the end of aligning them together when the issue was joined, became his ambition. He began "guilfully angling" for some sort of assignment—any sort—which might permit of his enhancing mutual understanding and goodwill between the two great English-speaking powers. This became his self-appointed mission *to which he was ready to subordinate all else.*

That quiescent patriotism which had always lain at the core of his political thinking, far from being diminished by his concern in the wider field, was fanned to incandescence. He would consider no engagement, however profitable, which did not commend itself to him as a "contribution to American life." Nothing could he reconcile with his self-respect which did not have some bearing on either national enlightenment or international comity. (One exception must be made to this, as will appear later.)

He was delighted at receiving an invitation from the British Broadcasting Corporation, which, after considerable delay, developed into a series of messages by short wave to the British Isles. The stated tariff of the Town Crier at this period was \$3,500 an appearance. He offered his services to the BBC for \$100 per broadcast.

There was a restriction: the corporation would prefer non-political matter. Would he kindly eschew any reflections upon the tense European situation? What they wanted from him was friendly, folksy stuff (they did not, of course, employ the latter adjective, but that was the meaning), the vox humana stop with all its seductive overtones and tremolos. Aleck was flabbergasted. Vox humana was all very well for ordinary occasions; what was needed now was Vox Americana. With heart and mind obsessed by the world threat, what could he find to

say to Englishmen within these cramping limitations that would not be "either misleading or ineffective"?

How far he committed himself to the innocuous programme is uncertain. If he did give any assurances of neutrality he promptly went back on them. In his initial broadcast of 28 June 1939 he thus delivered himself:

"The war—the undeclared war that's just around the corner—gives a fourth dimension to the most casual remark any American may make to any Englishman. . . . It is so easy—so terribly easy—to be dauntless in the bright face of danger threatening somebody else. Therefore, lest I find myself indulging in that peculiarly loathsome form of courage, I shall try, in these broadcasts, to keep my mouth shut on the subject of the war."

Thereupon he launched upon a topic that could hardly be regarded as purely non-controversial, German concentration camps and refugees, before reaching his programme subject, which was Irving Berlin.

Presumably there was protest. His next four deliveries were pure milk of human kindness, without a drop of acid. But his finale, on Lincoln's Gettysburg address, had a typical Woolcott stinger in its tail. It concluded thus:

"In an age when bandits on horseback the world around are challenging all that Lincoln had and was, the words he spoke at Gettysburg long ago sound across the world like a trumpet. Will we hear him—really hear him—at last?"

Mild enough it seems to-day. But in that period of forlorn hopes and desperate gropings, with English statesmanship still huddled beneath the Chamberlain umbrella, this was explosive stuff. A month later England and Germany were fighting.

Woolcott now concentrated his energies upon spurring his country into the war. Much as he disliked committee work he joined with every available movement designed to further that end. No reasonable request for aid, whether financial or by pen or voice, was refused. Still the opportunity for which he was longing held off. His BBC broadcasts had been deliberate groundwork for an invitation to England. It came in 1940 from the London *Telegraph*, which proposed that he fly across by clipper, make a tour of war activities, write ten articles, and deliver a series of broadcasts to Great Britain with perhaps a supplement of two or three to America. Now that his artful scheming had come to fruition he was "such a damaged piece of goods" that he doubted

whether he could survive the trip. Feeling somewhat better, he decided that he would risk it if his physician went along to look after him, a suggestion to which the *Telegraph* readily assented. But Al Getman was ailing; he was in no shape for a transatlantic trip, with its inevitable wartime hardships and deprivations; nor, in his opinion, was Aleck. So the plan must be shelved. Aleck felt drcarily that he had "missed a boat that will never come my way again." He did not then know that a better boat was in the offing. Disappointment and alarm for his friend depressed him. He wrote to Getman:

It is no evidence of a sympathetic spirit that I am upset at the thought of your being ill. It shakes one of the underpinnings of my world to have you laid up. This is not merely or chiefly because you have been good for and to me during the past year. I could have said it almost any time in the past thirty years.

Wouldn't Al come to the island for a rest? It would do them both good. But the sick man was now beyond visiting. He was in hospital.

Again the British Broadcasting Corporation was after the Town Crier. They would like a fourteen-and-a-half-minute talk just after Christmas (Boxing Day), in Mr. Woollcott's anecdotal vein. No politics, please.

It was incredible! Here was a nation, battling for its life, a nation in bitter need of his country's aid, semi-officially selecting him to speak for America, asking him to soft-pedal the only topic of prime importance in the world. He was to be not Alexander Woollcott, the protagonist for international co-operation in the salvage of democracy, but the neighbourly Town Crier with his pleasant little protraitures and benignly intimate anecdotes. Oh, very well! If that was what they wanted, they should have it. He gave them the "Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts" essay on Stephen Foster, and this time he conscientiously held to his instructions. It was a mighty success; more so than he realized at the time. His sponsors knew what they were about. They fully appreciated his value as a mouthpiece of goodwill and set about getting him across to England, now that his health was mending.

The whole BBC-Woollcott hookup had been delayed and might even have miscarried through a ludicrous misunderstanding at the outset of the approach.

Paul Bonner, who had important connections in England, had written to him that the British Broadcasting Company wished to get

in touch with him. The letter was slow in reaching the addressee, who was in Philadelphia. There he was awakened out of a sound sleep by "an acutely British voice," so very British, in point of fact, that the ready Woollcott suspicions woke and stirred. This would be one of his horseplaying cronies, Charley MacArthur, Charley Lederer, or Bob Benchley. Well, they'd get no change out of *him*. The conversation proceeded about as follows.

BRITISH VOICE: Is this Mr. Alexander Woollcott?

ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT (*noncommittally*): Grummph!

B. V.: I represent the British Broadcasting Company in America.

A. W.: And I am Marie of Rumania.

B. V.: Eh? I beg your pardon. I didn't quite catch—Oh! Yes: very good. Mr. Woollcott, I am arranging to have President Roosevelt and ex-President Hoover broadcast to England, and I would like——

A. W.: What's the idea? Trying to foment war between the two countries? Twenty minutes of Hoover might do it.

B. V. (*effortfully*): *Very* amusing, Mr. Woollcott. We should like to have you broadcast to England on the future of American literature.

A. W.: It hasn't any.

B. V. (*discouraged*): When shall you be in New York?

A. W.: I don't know.

B. V. (*weakening*): Perhaps I'd better call to-morrow.

A. W.: Perhaps not.

Bonner's letter, arriving in the next mail, ruined Woollcott's breakfast. There was a pained explanation. Apologies were accepted (doubtless with some private British reflections upon the inexplicable sinuities of American humour) and the matter was postponed for consideration at some future date. Upon learning of the Town Crier's willingness to give his services for three per cent of his normal price, the corporation discarded any doubts of his goodwill.

Roosevelt's re-election was, in Woollcott's belief, essential to the war cause to which he was now dedicated. With his social and humanitarian leanings, it was logical that he should have been a Roosevelt partisan. Until the first term was well under way, he was doubtful. In the second, he plumped for the President, though he did not approve of everything done in the previous administration and slyly doubted whether Roosevelt did, either. Somewhat reluctantly he emerged from his "comfortable hole," as he put it, in the fall of 1936.

This is the old Town Crier, ringing his bell for the first time since the Sunday after Christmas . . . when I went into the great silence. It did seem to me that everyone in America, including Father Coughlin and myself, was talking too much, so I took in private a solemn vow never to go near a broadcasting studio at any time in 1936.

The fulminations of the "hate-Roosevelt" school exasperated him to action. His broadcast over CBS was as typically Woolcottian as one of the "Shouts and Murmurs" or the "Lessons in English," as witness this passage:

Indeed, even if I didn't warmly approve of much that Mr. Roosevelt had done, I think I should have to vote for him just to dissociate myself from so many of the men who have their knives out for him. To the great body of us jogging along in the middle of the road, one attractive thing about Franklin Roosevelt is the simple fact that against him, yelling for his blood, are all the extreme radicals and all the extreme conservatives, the incurable conservatives, who, like all their great forerunners, from the Pharaohs of Egypt to the last Tsar of All the Russias, are handicapped by the ironical fact that the one thing they don't know how to do is to conserve. Yes, I think I would have to vote for Roosevelt just on the strength of the men and the arguments against him.

And this, in which he pays his respects to the Republican propaganda of prosperity, apropos of the 1929 crash:

. . . I was so naïve as to believe that after that spectacular come-uppance, at least it could be predicted that never again would the Grand Old Party have the effrontery to claim a copyright on prosperity. Yet here they are, bright as a button, professing that now, as always, they alone know how to govern. In particular I have been interested in their ingenuities on the matter of relief. On this point their platform, which has all the intellectual integrity of a Hearst editorial—on this point their platform pats the poor man on the back and even as it does so gives a little, reassuring wink to the rich, as if to say "Don't take us seriously." The Republicans, it seems, are going to feed every hungry man in this country, and it isn't going to cost the taxpayer a cent. This, as far as I know, is the first time that a major political party in this country has promised to perform the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes.

This is forceful campaigning; Stephen Early thought so, at any rate. Woolcott had known Early in the World War, where he had served with distinction, but had not seen him in the interval between his having become an ex-soldier and Assistant Secretary to the President. Notwithstanding his effectiveness in the former campaign, the Town Crier

was still modest about his political qualifications and quite tentatively offered his services for 1940, suggesting that there must be plenty of others "more sagacious, more informed, and weightier." Early, now full Presidential Secretary, did not agree, nor did Charles Michelson, in charge of Democratic publicity; they wanted him but had doubts as to the state of his health. Early wrote to this effect, suggesting tactfully that they were neither of them as young as they used to be.

"I wish the New Deal had the power of legislating ages retroactively," he said.

Was Aleck sure that he could stand the strain? The answer was an unqualified yes. His health was "good enough for all practical purposes. . . . Indeed, I feel full of something and vinegar. . . . In any case, I would look on myself as a bum and a slacker if I did not at least try to throw in my two-cents'-worth on any issue on which I feel so strongly."

"I have gone mad," he wrote to a friend, "and bought myself a quarter-hour on the air for the night of November 1st."

The "two-cents'-worth" cost him exactly \$3,544. As there was some minor complication over his dealing with CBS as an individual, he got the Democratic National Committee to make the contract, then reimbursed them for the outlay. The broadcast, 10.30 to 10.45 p.m., went out over thirty-three stations. So shrewd a judge as the President was of opinion that no other utterance of the campaign was more effective. A handsome silver-mounted ruler was his gift to the Town Crier as a memento. In the same week Woollcott was on the air twice over NBC as mouthpiece for the National Committee of Independent Voters, and appeared at a Carnegie Hall Roosevelt rally where he and Dorothy Thompson were the principal speakers.

His estimate of his physical condition was optimistic. His personal physician had warned him against such endeavour. And now Al Getman's fine, high-minded, and serviceable career was drawing to its close. The obscure brain condition had progressed and he lay dying in a Rochester, N. Y., hospital whence he sent a last, courageous message to Aleck in a barely legible scrawl. His death made that crowded election week a nightmare to his old friend. Somehow Aleck got through it, taking time to go to Clinton for the funeral. One of his most deeply moved and moving letters told Dr. Gustav Eckstein of it:

Al's funeral service was in the College Chapel, packed to the doors with men and women who had come from great distances. . . . I wonder if you

remember the chapel bell which has been flinging its notes down into the valley for a hundred and twenty years. It is so vibrant that when I go back to the Hill for a visit it wakes me in the night until I get used to it. Hamilton men never forget it and the best poem ever written on the Hill<sup>1</sup> is all about it. I know that for me this business of finishing out the race without Al will be not unlike life on the Hill if, quite suddenly, the bell were hushed for ever.

I know from my only previous experience that I am a delayed-reaction boy and if some months from now you hear me howling like a dog you will know it is grief for the loss of my friend.

As his biographer I have no concern with the rightness or wrongness of Alexander Woollcott's political bias as set forth in the campaign quotations above. What I am impelled to put down as an essential of the record is the willing generosity and the uncompromising integrity with which he supported his political and social creed, and the qualities of citizenship which inspired him to unselfish efforts for what he believed to be right and patriotic. Unless he was wholly incapacitated, no call to a good cause ever found him unresponsive.

In every public duty he was high-principled, devoted, and courageous, an exemplary American.

## 32

### ENCORE

HITHERTO Woollcott's fits of depression had been attributable to digestive disorders or depleted vitality which convinced him of the probable futility of existence. Greater issues now possessed his mind and heart. His egotism, never firmly rooted in the conviction of greatness, was relegated to the background. He devoted less melancholy thinking to his own troubles and more to the desperate plight of the outer world. It was good for his soul. He withdrew from a large and festive party at Bomoseen to write to Marie Belloc Lowndes:

I do not have to tell you that in these days I have been thinking of nothing but England. Every letter from one of you is read again and again and passed

<sup>1</sup> One of Harry Esty Dounce's "Campus Odes," which Aleck preferred to anything written by the earlier and better-known Hamilton poet, Clinton Scollard. In this instance his superlative was justified.

from hand to hand, and it takes the heart out of a letter-writer to put pen to paper in a country where news isn't. I have no doubt at all that the majority of the American people want, for our own sake, to give all possible aid to England.

While the blitz was sweeping England and all seemed likely to be shattered to rubble except the nation's courage, the "cynical and bitter Alexander Woollcott," huddled over his island radio night after night, unashamedly weeping.

Only one consideration could distract him from his despairing melancholy and that was the ruling passion of his life, the stage.

Just once before he died, so he had told Moss Hart (at a time when he had no intention of dying), he wanted to star in a comedy, playing it according to his own taste, with none to say him nay or interfere with his interpretation. Something to the same effect had been confided to George S. Kaufman. The pair joined forces for the job. Kaufman, it will be remembered, had been Aleck's assistant in *The Times* dramatic department. He knew his chief well. Challenged, at one of the Algonquin parties, to sum up Aleck's character in a single word, he responded, after careful thought:

"Impossible."

To make the improbable plausible on the stage was the difficult task before the collaborators. From the meeting of their minds was conceived *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, one of the hits of the last theatrical decade.

The spark which blazed up into dramatic success was struck out by the impact of the Woollcott habitual bad manners at their most objectionable, upon the practised forbearance of Moss Hart. Bennett Cerf, in his book *Try and Stop Me*, gives this account of it:

*The Man Who Came to Dinner* was the direct result of a typical Woollcottian sojourn at Moss Hart's new Bucks County estate. He bullied the servants, condemned the food, invited friends of his own from Philadelphia to Sunday dinner, and wrote in Hart's guest book, "This is to certify that on my first visit to Moss Hart's house, I had one of the most unpleasant times I ever spent. . . ." The next day Hart was describing Woollcott's behaviour to George Kaufman. "Wouldn't it have been horrible," he ruminated, "if he had broken a leg or something and been on my hands the rest of the summer!" The collaborators looked at each other with a dawning delight in their faces and took the cover off the typewriter.

Like many another dramatic egg, it hatched an unanticipated chick



Its prospective star had prescribed that the role should be as different as possible from his real character. Starting out with professedly honourable intentions, the collaborators found it impossible to evade the glaring actualities. The only part that they could write for Alexander Woollcott was Alexander Woollcott. Back of it was their dominating, if subconscious, conviction that the only part which Alexander Woollcott would be competent to play was Alexander Woollcott.

That gentleman returned from a motion-picture romp with the Dionne quintuplets for a reading of the act-and-a-half which was as far as the team had progressed. He thought that they looked guilty. They felt guilty. They had flatly gone back on the understanding and produced what its victim characterized as a cartoon of him.

"They found it so easy and entertaining," was his charitable judgment, "that they could not resist. They did not wish even to go ahead with it without my consent."

Going ahead was all right; they had his permission. That he should present himself to the public as the "irascible, not to say insulting hero" (as Burns Mantle described Sheridan Whiteside) was quite another matter. Let somebody else do it.

Nothing else in the whole scheme of literary creation is as risky as a play. For all that Woollcott knew—and the authors shared his doubts—the venture might prove a flop. As the writing progressed, the likelihood of failure receded. It was a good play; the ex-critic's trained judgment told him that; it would probably be a popular play. Still, was it for him?

Several of his friends earnestly advised against his having anything to do with it. One of these was Edward Sheldon, to whom he read the script. There followed "an appalling silence." Finally the playwright stirred a little on his catafalque-like couch.

"Do you really think you are like that?" he asked in a voice that was strained and indignant.

Aleck was profoundly touched. "I didn't know I had friends who cared that much about me," said he afterwards.

The instant and impressive success of the comedy dispelled Woollcott's doubts and converted his reluctance. He was now eager to play it. Cartoon it might be; nevertheless, he frankly admitted that there were only twelve lines in the entire role of Sheridan Whiteside which he might not have spoken in real life: the words in which Whiteside brutalizes the nurse. He wrote to Alex Osborn, "Of course, this is a

libellous caricature. I should feel insulted, but, knowing me, you understand why I swallow the insult with relish."

In lieu of playing it himself, his choice for the role was Robert Morley, who had earned high critical commendation by handling the difficult name part in the drama *Oscar Wilde* with dignity and without offence. The recommendation was ignored. The authors selected a comparatively unknown and lushly hirsute actor, Monty Woolley, formerly a member of the Yale faculty. Too sound a judge not to appreciate an expert performance, Woolcott must have known that he could not hope to play himself as well as Woolley played him. Nevertheless, the fire was lighted within him. He had but one obsessive desire, to get in there and be Sheridan Whiteside.

Woolcott attended the Boston opening and saw his impersonator make an undeniable hit. The usual gathering of congratulatory friends crowded the star's dressing-room at the close. There was a hush when Woolcott entered. He regarded Woolley speculatively.

"Hmm!" he murmured, as if to himself. "Now, who should have played the part? Bob Morley, perhaps? Or Lou Calhern?"

People have sometimes wondered why Aleck was not more popular with his fellow actors.

One certainty must have been impressed upon him: that Woolley was destined for Broadway. No chance for Aleck there. Unlike his fellow professionals, he preferred the routine of travel. It immersed him in America, he said. He rather hoped for the Chicago billing, but Clifton Webb got the assignment.

No matter who played it, whether the burly and bewhiskered Woolley or the slender and steely Webb, the part was unconcealably Woolcott, and was so identified by critic and playgoer alike. Heywood Brown, dipping back into dramatic criticism, wrote:

George Kaufman and Moss Hart have dug a highly diverting play out of the Woolcott saga. It embellishes a legend rather than presents us with the Town Crier complete and in the flesh. . . . We might have Alec at Hamilton, Alec on the Town, Alec on a Gunboat, Alec on the Stars and Stripes . . . this is the first of a series, somewhat in the manner of the Frank Merriwell books.

And Richard Watts, in the *Herald Tribune*, surmised:

What the authors seem to be saying of their pal is that he is a swell fellow and all that and they love him, but in his way he is rather a rat.

A third company was recruited to play the Far West. The plan was to remain on the Coast through the spring, disband for the summer, and reopen in late September for a six-week engagement in Philadelphia, followed by Washington, Baltimore, and other cities. Woollcott was to be starred, with a percentage of the take in addition to his salary, and with Rex O'Malley, Claudia Morgan, Betty Blythe, and Mabel Taliaferro in support.

A lecture tour for which he had contracted must be completed. Finishing in Vancouver, he hurried down to Hollywood, in January 1940, and went into rehearsal. The locality, which he deemed "completely loathsome," would certainly not have been his choice, but there were compensations.

He took a hotel bungalow, settled in with a luxurious retinue, including his manager, Joseph Hennessey, his secretary, Leggett Brown, and a valet, and embarked upon a round of entertaining and being entertained. Kaufman and Hart were in a neighbouring lodge; other neighbours were Charles Laughton, Bob Benchley, and Alan and Dorothy Parker Campbell. Within taxi distance were such friends as Harpo Marx, Walt Disney, Frank Craven, and Charlie Chaplin. Among them the new star lived up his twenty-four hours per day.

Busy though he was, he zestfully took time to vent his ill temper in a letter so typical of one phase of his character that it is worth reproducing. The provocation was a form letter, sent out to all Hamilton alumni, requesting biographical data for a compilation. Aleck ignored the first and the second, but the third roused him to action, his friend Wallace Johnson, the college secretary, being the recipient:

Los Angeles,  
Dec. 11, 1939.

Dear Wally,

Since I have your assurance that the enclosed is your final request, it is safe for me to report to you something told me by the greatest of living doctors. He said that the paper work in the modern hospital was now so thorough that the record of each case was complete by the time the patient died. I gather that Hamilton College is succumbing to a similar passion for unvital statistics, but in that vice it shall receive no encouragement from me nor any other alumnus with a decent amount of spirit. You may gather that I consider your airy request for all the information the form demands as an inexcusable imposition.

There was a further suggestion that the seeker should go to *Who's Who*—or elsewhere

Sheridan Whiteside is a part to daunt a veteran actor by its length, since the character is almost continuously on the stage from the moment when, a visiting and celebrated lecturer, he is brought, by the exigencies of a broken leg, under the hospitable roof of his small-city hosts, through the enforced visit when he infests the household like a pestilence, to the finale when he is brought back in with his other leg broken. Aleck learned it "standing on his head."

How good he was in the part depended upon whether one had previously seen Monty Woolley. Those who had, tended to rank Woollcott a poor second. Those who had not, found him satisfactory. The Far-Western critics (who, naturally, had not) were uniformly favourable.

The play opened in Santa Barbara, whence the star wrote to Beatrice Kaufman:

"You may take it from me that I was pretty lousy."

By the time Fresno was reached, he had come to be, in his own estimation, "comparatively good," and from San Francisco he assured a correspondent that he was "on the authority of an ex-dramatic critic, simply superb." San Francisco concurred. The troupe played to crowded houses.

There was living in San Francisco with her husband, George Creel, the former Belasco star, Blanche Bates. Creel and Aleck were not friendly. Aleck wished to see Mrs. Creel and thought that inviting her to luncheon would be a pleasant method. Did he thereupon telephone or write her a note? Not Aleck Woollcott, publicity expert *par excellence*! He concocted an advertisement for insertion, at regular rates, in the Personals column of the *News*.

If she who was the glory of *Under Two Flags* and *The Darling of the Gods* will communicate with the man now making a fool of himself (if that be not painting the lily) at the Curran Theatre, she can get a good lunch out of it.

Whatever the meal may have cost him, it could hardly have been more than a small percentage of the box-office value of the advertisement.

Another meal brought catastrophe in its wake. San Francisco is famous for good eating. The visiting actor made a list of its specialties, and for dinner ordered bisque of clams, baby squid, snails à la Bourgogne with fondue of truffles, alligator-pear salad, sweets, all washed down with a heavy Burgundy and uncounted cups of coffee. That night the overloaded stomach pressed too heavily on the overloaded

heart, which collapsed. Doctors were summoned. The verdict was imperative: no more acting; complete rest for an indefinite period; otherwise he would be well advised to make his will and tidy up his affairs, for another attack would finish him.

The show closed to the star's genuine and, this time, unselfish consternation, for he was conscience-sore that his self-indulgence should have wrought such hardship upon his fellow troupers. Summoned by wire, the faithful Joseph Hennessey flew out and took the sick man to Syracuse to be hospitalized. Most people of his age would have accepted the knockdown as a warning and a corrective. While in hospital, Aleck accepted the regimen, but as regards the future he was unchastened of spirit. He would do this and he wouldn't do that and if it killed him it was nobody's goddam business but his own and anyway it was a lousy world with Hitler threatening to overrun it and why anybody should go to a lot of trouble and discomfort to continue in it was more than he knew!

The physicians played upon his weakness. Did he wish to resume the role of Sheridan Whiteside? Not only did he wish, he damn well intended to. Very well: the prime requisite to doing so was to stay alive. And the prime requisite to staying alive was to behave himself and obey orders. The strategy was effective. Aleck returned to his island and addressed himself to the business of getting well, lamenting, meantime, the deprivations of an enforced diet but, on the whole, accepting them with unprecedented docility. Two quarts of liquids per day, and no coffee (though he broke that painful rule twice), so reduced him that by midsummer he wrote to Adaline Fuller:

On August first the specialists are scheduled to assemble once again around this old body and decide how soon and how hard I may go back to work, but about two weeks ago I suddenly ceased to be miserable, and I may tell you privately that I have set October first as the date for climbing down off the shelf.

And in a later gleeful missive to Cornelia Otis Skinner he bragged of having "peeled off forty pounds, and lissome is the word for Yours with great affection, A. Woolcott."

One hundred and ninety-three pounds might constitute lissomeness in Aleck's mind, but it did not satisfy medical specifications. They were set at one hundred and eighty-five. Failing to make the weight, the patient was penalized accordingly. He was forbidden to go back into the play as scheduled for late September.

"I regret this more than there's any point in my saying," he mourned.

Another and harsher embargo was laid upon him. The London *Telegraph* offer was still open. To cross the Atlantic and see England at war, to get into the fight in some capacity, it mattered little what, would have assuaged his disappointment over the interdiction of his stage career. There was a consultation. The heart condition was found too unpromising. The plan was abandoned.

The character of the bed-jacketed grouch, Sheridan Whiteside, had meantime become identified in the mind of the show-going public with the real Alexander Woollcott. It afforded him a saturnine amusement. He wrote from hospital to Lady Colfax:

"In consequence" (of the stage portraiture), "each of the three nurses summoned to the job when I arrived went on duty most apprehensively, probably each with a dirk concealed in her stocking. I don't have to tell *you* that they were bewildered to find me practically indistinguishable from St. Francis of Assisi."

Good behaviour won its eventual reward. By the end of the year, the doctors permitted his return to the stage, though it *might* be more accurate to say that they acquiesced in it because there was no way of stopping him short of a strait-jacket. His heart was permanently damaged. He was taking dangerous risks in planning an active life. His attitude now was: What of it? Either he was going to get well or he was going to die. One thing he would not do, vegetate.

*The Man Who Came to Dinner* third company was reassembled to play the Eastern circuit, opening at Philadelphia in January 1941. With "a few years of life in the old boy yet," the star proceeded to make the most of them. He rollicked. At every "stand" he gathered friends and acquaintances about him.

"You ought to see me," he wrote to college mates who had not, enclosing tickets. "I'm really good."

One who saw the play in Washington, T. D. Martin, a social worker, wrote him:

Dear Alec,

I saw you and your play yesterday and enjoyed both thoroughly except for three unnecessary "God damns" and a half-dozen unnecessarily vulgar "wise-cracks." If these were deleted, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* would be a rollicking good comedy which I would be glad to recommend to all of my friends without qualification.

I remember that during your college days you frequently took pride in

maintaining a conspicuously cynical and sceptical attitude regarding certain spiritual affairs. During recent years as I have listened with pleasure to many of your radio broadcasts I have wondered whether you had had a complete change of heart or whether you are merely a good actor. After having seen your play yesterday, I am inclined to believe that the latter is the case.

If, while you are in Washington, you have time to drop in at our Headquarters Office, I will be glad to have the privilege of showing you what we are trying to do for the sake of the teachers and the boys and girls of this country.

Yours very sincerely,

T. D. Martin.

The reply, typically Woollcottian, was as follows:

My dear Martin,

This is to acknowledge your letter of March sixth, which really shocked me.

When you speak of "three unnecessary God damns" you imply that there is such a thing as a *necessary* God damn. This, of course, is nonsense. A God damn is never a necessity. It is always a luxury.

Yours very sincerely,

Alexander Woollcott.

He mildly baited Monty Woolley, when asked by an interviewer for an opinion on the first-string actor.

"He needs a shave," said the third-string man.

Again in a broadcast he referred to the role of Sheridan Whiteside, "played in New York with great charm and distinction by Mr. Monty Woolley, whose performance differs from mine in many respects, but chiefly in one. I have a razor."

As for the characterization, it was his policy never to admit for publication the connection between the stage presentment and his own personality. Tongue in cheek, he appeared before the curtain and informed his applauding audience:

"It is not true that the role of the obnoxious Sheridan Whiteside, which I play, was patterned after me. Whiteside is merely a composite of the better qualities of the play's two authors, Messrs. Kaufman and Hart."

The play closed in May and the stage-struck amateur was again out of a job. He cast about him for another medium; offered suggestions to his playwriting friends; brought up again the question of a dual stardom with Harpo Marx. Failing of any result, he forgot his repulsion for the movies and accepted a Hollywood offer. One is moved to speculate

upon the genuineness of his vehemently proclaimed aversion to the screen. There was no financial reason why he should have undertaken to deliver the epilogue and prologue for a drearily mediocre Mickey Rooney-Judy Garland production, *Babes in Arms*. Better the camera and the klieg lights than complete invisibility, apparently. His contribution added nothing either to the picture or his own reputation. Of course he would have preferred the screen role of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. That was foreordained to Woolley.

Sale of the picture rights to Warner Brothers was held up for a time by a plagiarism suit. The author of an unproduced play came forward with a list of alleged parallels.

"It seems we stole the character of Woolcott from a play called *Sticks and Stones*," George Kaufman wrote to Aleck. "It will probably turn out that you got it from there, too."

The suit failed.

The picture was as successful as the play. It contributed another facet to that composite which was the Alexander Woolcott of public conception. To the hundreds of thousands who loved him for the benignity that was the Town Crier must now be added the stage and screen audiences who hated him for the malice that was Sheridan Whiteside.

It was all magnificent publicity. Aleck's spirits rose to it. He wrote "Lamb Girl" (Beatrice Kaufman) that he had "enjoyed the past twelve months rather more than any other year that I can remember."

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### VOX AMERICANA

At last the Town Crier was to have his chance. He was to go on the air unsponsored, uncensored, unfettered. In the spring of 1941 he had eagerly volunteered his services to the Fight for Freedom Committee, which had even more eagerly accepted them. He called his address "A Voice from the Cracker Barrel." It was printed in the committee's publication, *It's Fun to Be Free*, to which I am indebted for permission to produce these extracts, so representative of Woolcott at his most vigorous and pungent:



This is Woollcott speaking. All over this country there is a great murmur of voices. Confabs from countless cracker barrels. Talk under many an evening lamp. Men and women, old and young, rich and poor, wise and foolish, all talking freely about the war. How long will it last? How will it turn out? Are we in it now? Can we stay out of it? Listen and you will hear something as unmistakable as the footfalls of fate. The historic sound of the American people making up its mind. . . .

It is my guess that most people in this country have it quite clear in their minds what this war is about. The people of Germany, always strong in their conviction that they are a master race and now in the grip of an armed gang, headed by an able, tricky, and murderous adventurer named Adolf Hitler, have set out to take command of the world. The war is being fought to decide whether or not they will get away with it. Leading in the fight to stop Hitler in his tracks are the people of the British Commonwealth of Nations. To them when he took command, Winston Churchill offered blood and tears and toil and sweat. He brought them one thing more. Self-respect! That is an imponderable by-product but it strikes me as important and enviable. Enviable? Well, if you want to know just where you *do* stand in this whole matter, ask yourself one question. Which would you rather be right now—an Englishman in England or a Frenchman in France?

From the outbreak of this war the sympathies of America were immediate and almost unanimous. There was never any question about that. The people of this country had got Hitler's right number right at the start. From the first, by an overwhelming majority and as evidence of their natural inclination towards fundamental decency, they were against him. I suppose that the history of this nightmare year will some day be written by an American who at this moment is lying in a cradle pensively sucking his thumb. Unless in his prime all expression in this country is desiccated, there is no reason why his work should not be honest, and if so, I do hope he makes it quite clear that the immediate opposition to Hitler which developed in this country was not achieved by British propaganda. It was achieved by German propaganda. We knew all about Hitler, but our sources were original. Our notion that a world dominated by him would be unfit to live in comes from his own words, his own declared intentions, his own acts as reported to us in accounts okayed by his own censors. From the first, we knew he was an enemy and if we are not at war with him right now, it is not because of any obstruction put in the way by isolationist senators nor because we Americans are—as we are so often inaccurately described—a peace-loving people. If we are not officially at war with Hitler to-day it is for one reason. It is because, as things stand right now—but may not stand for long—he cannot get at us.

There followed an attack upon Charles A. Lindbergh for opposing aid to England, then:

For here is a fact which Lindbergh and his colleagues of the America First Committee must face. Whether they admit it or not, whether they like it or not, whether, indeed, that is any part of their purpose, they are working for Hitler. . . . For they, like all the rest of us, are trapped in a tragic irony. In this world to-day there is no such thing as neutrality. You are either for Hitler or against him. You either fight him or you help him.

Even the well-intentioned people who maintained the isolationist theory were, he said, living in a fool's paradise. From there he went on to discuss what he termed the

really dangerous . . . Fifth Column that is in your heart and mine—the Fifth Column that is in all part-time citizens, in each of us who would so like to go our pleasant ways and pretend all this is no affair of ours. Why should we be bothered? Business as usual. Pleasure as usual. Look in your heart and see.

I am resisting the Fifth Column in mine when I now stand up to be counted—*Ich kann nicht anders*—as one who thinks that the Fight for Freedom Committee is more nearly right in this matter—the Committee of which the faith was magnificently expressed by President Conant of Harvard in a broadcast made over this network just three weeks ago. He wound up with these words:

"In my opinion strategy demands we fight to-morrow, honour and self-interest that we fight before the British Isles are lost. But whether we fight to-morrow or on a later day, we shall before long close our ranks and fight to win."

Such was Woollcott's declaration of faith. To that affirmation he was now to devote what remained of his energies. So far had the profoundly aroused pacifist come.

Some ninety-five per cent of the responses to the radio appeal were favourable. What few were hostile were also fervid. "You dirty, vile, fat slug," began one letter to the committee, not individually addressed.

"Anyone else here answer to the description?" asked Aleck amiably. "No takers? Very well; hand it over."

Powerful forces moved obscurely in Washington. There was a regulation to be got around, the rule against a citizen of the United States travelling in a belligerent's ship. Officialdom can, if sufficiently interested, find a way to deal with rules which itself has formulated. Two officialdoms were concerned in this case, British and American. Whether the obstructive proviso was avoided, evaded, or plain ignored is not wholly clear. The outcome is an American citizen, fat, puffy,

and sweating from every pore, hoisted aboard the quite definitely belligerent H.M.S. *Resolution*, at the port of Philadelphia, and three weeks later the press on both sides of the Atlantic printing on the front pages:

### WOOLLCOTT IN ENGLAND

The summons to leave for England early in September and give a series of broadcasts for the British Broadcasting Company had exalted Aleck to the pinnacle of his ambitions. This is what he had been hoping and scheming for since 1939, if not earlier. Anyone else would have flown across. But his heart condition was such that the rarefied upper air would be too risky. Hence the official finagling which produced for him passage on a battleship. Even this was a grave venture. His friends protested; the medical faculty held out dark warnings. He ignored them. As in the case of the McMartin funeral, he would go though it killed him. It was a duty laid upon him by a high compulsion which he never in the course of his life denied.

His secretary, H. Leggett Brown, accompanied him. The ocean trip proved to be a strain, probably more severe than the flight would have been. Aleck had an officer's cabin on an upper deck, which necessitated his crawling up and down iron ladders to the mess hall three decks below. War-craft hatchways are not proportional to the Woollcott girth; the passage was a tight squeeze. After the ship left Bermuda, the civilian passenger was transferred to a cubby hole next the mess hall. The weather was intolerably hot. Aleck spent most of his days on deck, sweating and panting in his underclothes.

It required most of the three weeks' time, Secretary Brown records, "for Aleck to worm his way into the hearts of the reticent British seamen."

"There you have my life in a nutshell," Aleck wrote somewhat cryptically, "... crossing the perilous seas at the age of fifty-five, carrying a box of chocolates for Lady Astor."

Luggage regulations being liberal on the man-of-war, he took with him "a Santa Claus pack of presents," heedfully addressed to the desires rather than the needs of his friends. He paralleled Masefield's quinquireme of Nineveh, with its

... cargo of ivory  
And apes and peacocks,  
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine,

in his own cargo of cigarettes and tea and lipstick, hairpins and bobby pins and chocolate creams. Cheeses, coffee, handkerchiefs, pencils, and bacon rounded out the list. All of these precious gifts he dispensed early to appreciative beneficiaries, and found himself left with only two items when he went to call on Bernard Shaw, a fitch of bacon and a packet of razor blades. The proffer met with a tempered enthusiasm. Shaw is a bewhiskered vegetarian.

Pressmen met Woolcott at the pier. He was ready for them with an anecdote about Benedict Arnold, which he had always found good for a laugh. But not apparently in England. The flat silence was broken—and explained—by a London reporter who asked courteously:

"And who, Mr. Woolcott, is this Mr. Arnold?"

The visitor admitted to a pang of sympathy with Henry Ford, who, on the witness stand, had experienced difficulty in distinguishing between Benedict Arnold and Arnold Bennett. It was a reminder to the American that our Revolutionary history is not as important in England as in America. That knowledge was reflected in his broadcasts.

First impressions of London chilled his elation at being there. His old friend, F. Tennyson Jesse, came to the city to see him, and found him "... his own infuriating, affected, brilliant, and generous self. But it was sad to see him, for he was a sick man, and he felt the war so intensely he would hardly speak of it. He refused petulantly to see London's ruins: he could imagine them, he said."

Ruins were not avoidable. He had to climb over them when Miss Jesse took him to the Old Bailey and afterwards to a little old inn, where he quaffed musty ale and listened to the manageress's description of salvaging the stock when the adjoining building burned down.

"This is the England I came to see," he told Miss Jesse, "girls like these. This is the England I knew must still be living."

An older friend, Mrs. Marie Belloc Lowndes, found him established regally in an upper-floor suite of the Dorchester Hotel, commanding a view of parks and gardens, and doubts whether he "ever spent such happy weeks as during this last visit. English men and women of every sort and kind came in to see him and he never seemed too busy to see anybody. Day after day he would sit on a huge sofa, clad in his brightly coloured dressing-gown, looking like a happy Buddha and pouring out a stream of brilliant, amusing, and sometimes pathetic talk."

Hitherto England had been a playground for Aleck. This was sterner

business. However, old friends were not neglected. The social rounds were as demanding as the working schedule. How could he come to England and not see Rebecca West, Evelyn Waugh, H. G. Wells, Sibyl Colefax, Graham Robertson, and the Max Beerbohms? Thornton Wilder was in London. So were Averell Harriman and his daughter, and Noel Coward. Aleck met Ambassador John G. Winant, and the two busy and tired men—there were few busier in all England—found time to see one another several times and to lay the foundation for an admiring and what might have been an enduring friendship. Edward R. Murrow was another of Aleck's admirations; as opportunity offered they would have a drink or a hasty luncheon together. Aleck went to see H. G. Wells and (of course) wrote a piece about him. He went to see George Bernard Shaw and wrote a piece about him, too. In a contemporary letter he boasted that he had "out-Shawed Shaw," but regrettably neglected to state in what department. He brought back (and later used in print) the old story of Mrs. Pat Campbell's post-rehearsal crack at the Irish iconoclast apropos of his vegetarianism:

"Some day you'll eat a beefsteak, Shaw, and then God help all women!"

Graham Robertson was living a remote life in a Surrey hamlet, under conditions of wartime simplicity. Aleck turned up there without warning in that rarest of luxuries, a car, announcing that he had come to spend the night. The two friends talked into the late hours, until Mrs. Cave, the ancient and disapproving housekeeper, significantly appeared with candles. Her employer, she pointed out, was not in the best of health, and it was time to go to bed.

Her employer had other ideas. With a few shrewd questions he got her started upon reminiscences of the eminent Victorians whom she had known in her eighty-seven years and presently she was regaling the American with amusing tales of Tennyson, George Eliot, and the Pre-Raphaelites, "until," writes Robertson, "she came to her *bonne bouche*, her nursing of Thomas Carlyle during his last illness, in gratitude for which service he bequeathed to her his best feather bed."

The guest's eyes lighted up. "Feather bed? Carlyle's feather bed? Where is it?"

"In my cottage next-door, sir. Your chauffeur is going to sleep there."

Robertson interpreted with forebodings Aleck's frown, the tightening of his lips. The cottage, damp and musty, was no place for an ailing

man, as the guest obviously was. Yet the other could well understand his friend's reluctance to be forestalled by a chauffeur in his chance of going back to America and bragging that he had slept in Thomas Carlyle's best feather bed.

"I knew better than to protest," says Robertson, "but, as I watched the inspiration gradually fading, I realized uncasily that Aleck was beginning to take a little care of himself at last. . . . Early next morning he left, showering so many gifts upon me from his store that all remaining for the next old gentleman to whom he owed a visit was a lipstick and three pairs of sheer silk stockings."

Lady Astor, who makes it a point to take up every important American visitor, got on the Woolcott trail. There was an unpicked bone between them. In his pen portrait of Paul Robeson, Woolcott had given an unflattering picture of the ex-Virginia *grande dame* attempting to patronize the negro actor and not having much success at it. Either she had forgotten it or was willing to ignore it in her eagerness to lure him down to Plymouth. After some dodging on his part, she caught him by telephone and a spirited passage ensued, the feminine M.P. insisting that it was the visitor's duty to himself and his country to come and see what was being done in her locality, Aleck replying that that was all very well, but where was he to find the time?

"They yelled and screamed at each other over the telephone like a couple of fishwives," reports Leggett Brown, "and in the end she shouted him down. That turned out to be a wonderful trip, for she did know the inhabitants of her city from one end to the other, and gave Aleck as good a picture of the average Englishman at war as anyone could possibly get. They disagreed violently for the two days they were together, but wound up with great respect for each other. His one comment was, 'My God, what energy and no brains can do for you!'"

An even more picturesque encounter was related to the radio listeners of England by their American guest:

But first let me describe one of the thousand memories I shall be taking home with me—memories of things seen and persons met. This was a meeting which took place on a Sunday morning in an old cottage not far from Dorking. It began when my young hostess said to me—quietly, mind you, and as if it were a matter of no consequence—"Mr. Woolcott, this is Winston Churchill." Sure enough, there he stood, rosy, sturdy, tranquil, grave, looking for all the world like a great, healthy baby. What was said between us? Frankly, I don't remember. I think I said, "Well, well, well," or "For crying out loud," or

something brilliant like that. And what did he say? Nothing; not a word. Germany? Russia? America? Not a word. Instead he just stared at me, and over his face there came an expression which I recognized as one of distaste. I even began to suspect that he didn't like me. In another moment I was sure of it, for throwing back his head and opening his mouth wide, he let out a roar of displeasure. This Winston Churchill was just one year old that week. I shall think of him often on my way home, realizing as I do that his chances of growing up a free man in a free world depend—and how precariously!—on the gumption, the foresight, and the political competence manifested by his elders during the next two years on both sides of the Atlantic.

It was a constant hope at the back of Aleck's mind that he might meet the infant's grandfather before leaving. He never so much as hinted it to any official, feeling that he had no right to impose upon the heaviest-burdened man in England. Towards the end of his stay, Brendan Bracken, the Minister of Information, called up Leggett Brown. Mr. Alexander Woolcott was expected at a certain country house for Sunday breakfast. Other plans had been made for that Sunday, Brown explained, his principal being out at the time. Bracken replied that this was a "command performance." As, for various reasons, it could not have been royalty, the secretary had no difficulty in interpreting. He said that they would be there.

They drove down. The Prime Minister appeared in his pyjamas. He was in specially good humour and fine conversational form. For once Aleck was content, so Brown thinks, with the secondary role of listener. He left behind him the memory of a tactful deed. Mrs. Churchill was suffering from an annoyingly stuffy cold in the head. Fine-texture handkerchiefs were practically extinct in the realm. A box of these invaluable items had been in Aleck's assorted gift cargo, but all had been distributed. He made a tour of collection, retrieved half a dozen from people who needed them less than the afflicted Mrs. Churchill, and sent them to her.

There was plenty of work to be done in preparation for the broadcasts. Leggett Brown reports their visiting bomber commands in the middle of England, talking to the fliers as they prepared to bomb Germany, then waiting for them to return and hearing at breakfast the stories of those who did return. They called at fighter stations around London, took trips to Dover, Southampton, Plymouth, and Bristol. Everything was open to the visitors. In a fortnight of hasty travel they saw more of England at war than a native would see in a lifetime.

So far as his friends are aware, no official instructions were given or suggestions offered regarding the Woolcott broadcasts. The purpose for which he had come overseas was clear in his mind: to perform a service for England and thus to his own country (since he now regarded the destinies of the two nations as inextricably intertwined) by bringing them closer together in spirit and understanding. He was serenely confident of his ability to contribute to this end. Herein he was supported by the shrewdest of the British propaganda experts. They had come to regard him as the very voice of America; not of the leaders, the politicians, the statesmen, but of the generality of level-headed, clear-thinking, patriotic citizens; a voice attuned not only to amuse and entertain, but, by its contrived implications, to persuade, to enlist sympathy, to promote community of feeling. That, and not exhortation or disquisitions upon international salvation, was what they wished from the Town Crier. Come over into Macedonia and help us—by just talking to us about your own country, and to your own country about us. The English are an outspoken and direct-minded race, *but they do not lack for subtlety.*

Whether or not his belief was well founded, he considered it to be implicit in his mission that he should eschew the topic which pre-empted the interest of the whole world. In the first of his five broadcasts he offered a half-promise:

"I shall try obediently to avoid the subject of the war, probably with the same success which rewarded Mr. Dick in the matter of King Charles's head. But quite aside from the fact that I am neither authorized nor equipped to speak for the American people, it does seem to me that any person from my country who tries to talk to England about the war must suffer many discomforts."

Through the first two broadcasts (Number One a pleasantly rambling talk on the differences between British and American speech; Number Two, on Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes) he held to his resolution. The Third was historical, "1777 and All That," a humorously tactful disquisition on that sideshow (from the British viewpoint) to national history, the revolt of the American colonies. As so often happened with Woolcott broadcasts, the sting was in the tail. He had explained in sufficient detail who Benedict Arnold was, and went on to say that Alice Duer Miller was planning to follow up her *White Cliffs* with a poem on that sorry traitor.

"She is thinking of calling it *The Appeaser*," he finished. .



His fourth appearance was on the "Any Questions?" programme, a pretty solemn and leisurely counterpart of our "Information, Please!" with the Brains Trust, Professor Joad, Commander Campbell, and Dr. Julian Huxley, as regulars; gravely perpending such queries as "Is Palmistry Scientific?" "Is the Horse Doomed?" and "What is the Brains Trust's Recipe for Success?" Woollcott's fellow guest was Lady Jones, who wrote *National Velvet* over the *nom-de-plume* of Enid Bagnold. Woollcott furnished some amusement but little enlightenment to the scholarly proceedings. The question which most interested him was "If we could be the spectator of some past event for an hour, which hour in history would we choose?" On past records I would have risked a bet that Aleck's selection would be to have been in at the death of Lizzie Borden's parents. I should have lost. Remarking that "there is something base about all of us," he named the murder trial of Dr. Crippen, with the qualification that he passed over Lincoln's Gettysburg address only because it was inaudible to all but a few hundred of the restless audience, and that, if he had been there, he probably could not have heard the speaker.

The final broadcast ended with the "Home, Sweet Home" bit of distorted history, and an effective farewell:

I shall soon be starting home laden with messages to people in America from people in Britain. I shall remember them all and deliver them all, if I get there. I repeat only one of them to you. It was entrusted to me by a wise and gentle scholar who, when I asked him if he had any word to send, only shrugged his shoulders. Then he changed his mind and came back to me and said: "Tell them not to pity us." Those words linger in my mind as I take my leave.

Out of his vehement partisanship was born an understanding of the British mind, even where it differed most widely from the American. Instinctively he knew that what England wanted from overseas entertainers was that they should be natural Americans, not feverishly sprightly cousins, striving to divert a stricken nation from its sorrows. When Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt came over, they were deliberating whether, for British consumption, they should descend from their high estate as the glamorous representatives of a high theatrical tradition and go vaudeville. Woollcott intervened. G. B. Stern tells of it in her autobiographical *Trumpet Voluntary*.

But at this point their great friend Alexander Woollcott laid a hand on their throbbing brows. He advised them, when they were able to come to England,

to plan their advent as though there were no war, as though everything were normal and serene: to take the plays they would anyhow have taken, and to say to themselves and to everyone else: "Yes, of *course* we're doing our usual season in England—why not?" . . . and that had been the spirit of Aleck, himself, when he last came over to see us.

Fears that he would not survive an air trip had prevented Woollcott from the quick and easy method of flying to England. A dead Town Crier would have been of little use for propaganda purposes. Now that his mission was accomplished, he was ready to take the risk. Leggett Brown writes:

With much trepidation, and with a little oxygen bottle all our own, we flew out of Bristol at the end of November for Lisbon. We were there for a few days, haggling with Pan-American Airways and winding up on an American Export boat bound for New York. We got back December 2nd. His doctors had told him that such a trip might very well prove to be his last, but I think he came back in as good shape as he left, and certainly in much better spirits.

Repatriated, Aleck recalled with special savour these episodes of his trip: the meeting with Winston Churchill (the grandfather); his reunion with Marie Belloc Lowndes and Rebecca West; his instant enslavement at the hands of the fascinating Baroness Budberg (the "Moura" of *British Agent*), and the finding of a copy of *Little Women* on a bookstall, which struck such a pang of nostalgia to his heart that he could hardly control his voice to ask, "How much?"

The journey, he told Alex Osborn, was "the high spot of my life." It was also "that unbelievably exhausting endeavour."

"But if you think I wish I hadn't gone," he wrote to me, "you're crazy."

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### REBOUND

THAT unbelievably exhausting endeavour did not exhaust Woollcott. Rather, it incited him to further effort. He was spoiling for a fight. Age and debility forbade any hope of an active part in the war, though he

could not stifle his yearning to be back at his old task of cleaning up a hospital if nothing better offered.

How could he be most useful at home? The Middle West was the focal point of isolationism and its concomitant, Anglophobia, closely interwoven motivations in that part of the country. Here Big Bill Thompson had been elected Mayor on a platform of "busting King George in the snoot, if he ever stuck it into Chicago." Here the powerfully influential *Chicago Tribune* had been fomenting distrust of all things European, England in particular, throughout the region. It was, for Woollcott, the enemy's country.

Nowhere in the nation was the Town Crier more popular than in the Midwest. Again discarding medical advice he contracted for a series of twelve lectures there. Impatient of delay, he did not even wait to rest up from the transatlantic trip, but planned to be off in mid-December 1941.

Then Japan struck at Pearl Harbour.

The assault was a bitter tonic to Woollcott's spirits. At long last we were in it! That it would be a hard fight he never doubted, nor was he over-sanguine of the outcome. He was not lulled nor gulled by the proclamations of a braggart admiral that we could sweep the Japs from the Pacific in six weeks. Sober consideration convinced him that England was still in dire straits, that the United States was starting under a grave handicap, and that nothing less than universal and co-ordinated effort would avert defeat.

He put sober consideration aside and set out on one of the most strenuous rounds of his career.

Essentially these war addresses were placatory, persuasive, explanatory in method, and diplomatic in manner. Solidarity of the Allies was his main theme. His purpose was not to argue (at least, not obviously) but to present a sympathetic picture of the British Isles at war. Only when he referred to his *bête noire*, the *Chicago Tribune*, did he hit out. "A few libellous statements" about that newspaper, to which he admitted, were, he exulted, received with warm approbation by most of his audiences. He was delighted and encouraged. The section was not, he thought, as anti-war as it had been pictured.

Back to Bomoseen he went in January 1942, "to catch my breath, of which my supply is less than of yore." Bad news from England further depressed him. He suffered from accesses of numbness. His heart action was tricky. He became sick in mind and body.

Friends recommended that he consult a distinguished New York specialist, who shall here be called Dr. X. This practitioner, though of unquestionable scientific attainments, has a method of impressing his clientele suggestive of Cagliostro and the medieval school of mumbo-jumbo. He treated Aleck to his best show.

The patient, ushered in by a nurse, was motioned to a chair. Seated at a desk, the expert said absently, "How are you? Sit down."

While the caller was explaining how he was, Dr. X rose and put a musical record on the Victrola, then returned to his desk and wrote with absorption. Aleck was still engaged on his catalogue of woes when the physician jumped up, strode across the room, and thrusting a spearlike finger at him, thundered:

"You're all right. Nothing wrong with you but a coronary thrombosis."

He went on to elucidate Aleck to himself in terms which fascinated the hearer. The patient learned that he was an unusual, nay, a phenomenal instance of something or other which he vaguely understood to be hyper- or hyposensitivity. This much he did get clearly, that he was practically insulated against pain; he was also peculiarly resistant to heat, cold, hunger, fatigue, and most of the other ills that flesh is heir to. Whatever physician attended him thereafter must be apprised of this, lest he be misled into thinking that Mr. Woollcott was suffering less than he actually was. Somewhat muddled, but quite elevated by the flattering implication that his was not as other physiques are, the invalid left and for a time regaled his circle with recondite verbal theses upon neuro-insensitiveness and its attendant phenomena.

Through the winter he slipped slowly downhill. A sense of constriction in the intimate circumstances of existence beset him. Friends were marrying—a sort of abandonment, he felt.

"You have to face the fact," he wrote George Backer, "that the position of a man of fifty-five, unmarried and with no stake in the future in the shape of children, is not an enviable or successful one."

He had reached the period "when death comes breaking into the circle of our friends." Heywood Broun was gone, and for Aleck something shining had passed into darkness. Aunt Anne was gone: the Phalanx might now be written about freely as it could not have been in her tenancy, but for him who was the most loyal of his generation it would never be the same again. Al Getman was gone, leaving his comrade "irreparably impoverished."

"He had been my dear and sheltering friend for more than thirty years, and I counted that friendship an honour and a delight. He was one of the rocks on which my house was built."

"So, one by one, the lights go out," he wrote to Lucy Drage.

And to Sibyl Colefax, "... for anyone so injudicious as to live after fifty, life consists largely of such forlorn efforts to close ranks."

Death seemed to him an imminent likelihood for himself. It did not alarm him. What he dreaded with undispellable foreboding was disability. Writing to "Polly" Bucklin he could keep a stiff upper lip and profess a submissive readiness to endure the half-life of the spiritually crippled, if need be; actually, he knew himself unfitted for the meek acceptances of valetudinarianism.

More impersonal considerations contributed to his melancholy. Hamilton College, the focal point of his warmest loyalty, was much on his mind. His friend President Hutchins of Chicago University, the protagonist of Educational Bigness, had persuaded him that the small, cultural college was doomed to be engulfed in the sweep of a utilitarian age. That, as much as his conviction of his uselessness as a trustee, underlay his resignation from the governing board. He brooded upon a future in which his beloved Alma Mater would become a ghost campus of skeleton buildings on an abandoned hilltop whither he might no longer return for refreshment of spirit. And always there were his deep forebodings about the course of the war.

Homesickness for the only spot which he had ever felt to be his home since the Phalanx possessed him. It was still dead of winter when Joseph Hennessey took him back across Bomoseen ice to Neshobe Island. Dark days followed. Ambition flagged. He felt that he might never write again. Each heart attack left a derangement of memory, "a state of fuzzy-mindedness" which scared and irritated him.

Worry over his own financial complications did not interfere with his concern over those of others. The loss of Al Getman was a constantly present sorrow to him; he sorely missed his physician and friend in both phases and cast about for some practical means of testifying to his affection. The Getman family affairs were temporarily straitened.

I have long had it in the back of my mind [he wrote Louise Getman] that I would like to help young Al get the kind of schooling he wants, and I have too lively a sense of the economic uncertainties of these times to promise such help in advance to anybody.



THE PHALANX





WOOLLCOTT

His solution was to send the boy to the Loomis School for one year and continue as long as he was able. A year later he was writing young Al, in that charmingly deprecatory spirit which he so often manifested towards the young:

Since paying the whole score as long as I can or am here to do it would give me great pleasure, I hope you will let me do it. If you don't hear from me in September, please write to this address and complain like hell.

A cheque for \$400 was enclosed, together with \$50 as "pocket money to be going on with." Until his death Aleck kept up the school payments, after which Joseph Hennessey, knowing what he would have wished, carried on.

While Aleck was still at Bomoseen, trying to restore mind and body, bad news reached him from a quarter where he was still achingly susceptible. Walking in her sleep, Neysa McMein had fallen down-stairs and broken her back.

"I have felt ever since as if someone were kneeling on my heart," said Aleck.

He was too ill to go to her. Severe abdominal pains beset him with recurrent sharpness. He knew they *must* be severe to cross that lofty "pain-threshold" upon which the impressive Dr. X had dissertated so flatteringly. Trench mouth set in. There is some reason for believing that he had a slight cerebral haemorrhage.

"I have been a mass of misery most of the time, and most atrocious company," he wrote, "being given to interminable and rather melancholy anecdotes."

To dull the pain, he had recourse to drugs. Before going to bed, he would take chloral hydrate to make him sleep, wake up in the middle of the night with pain from the gallstones which were increasing in size and number, take another dose of the soporific, or perhaps switch to morphine, lie semi-stupefied until eleven o'clock, and be unfit for anything through the day.

Inactivity and loneliness made his hours a burden. He to whom companionship had been as the breath of his nostrils was now to "learn how men in exile feed on dreams." He did not like the diet. He lacked the resources of self-adequacy.

More and more he came to lean upon Joseph Hennessey, who was for a time his sole companion. Hennessey had come to him as an employee, become a friend, and was now guardian and disciplinarian.



Aleck's insurgent spirit chafed, but accepted the necessity. With affectionate ill-temper he complained of "... having to take my orders from Hennessey to the letter," and that "... this business of acquiring along the way a friend as selfless, as protective, and as kind as Jo, has certain disadvantages. . . . I'm being docile as hell."

An excursion on the ice chilled his depleted blood. The cold developed swiftly into pneumonia. Summoned by wire, Dr. Frode Jensen flew up from Syracuse. Aleck was very low when he arrived. At whatever risk, it was necessary to get him into hospital. Swathed against the cold, he was taken on a sled across the still firm March ice, transferred to a hearse, which was the closest approximation to an ambulance available (Aleck was too far gone to observe the sinister character of his transportation), and rushed the two hundred and twenty-five miles to the Hospital of the Good Shepherd in Syracuse. There was still resistance enough in that pudgy but sturdy body to survive the rigours of the trip.

Within a few days he was sitting up and demanding to see friends. He indulged in introspection and decided that (writing to Mrs. W. Parmer Fuller) he deeply regretted nothing that he had ever done, but sweated cold horrors over "things I didn't do, failures of courage and generosity, and even common decency, for which I can never atone." This is not the only instance in which he exculpated himself from sins of commission and lamented the things that he had left undone. The idea seems to have possessed him with the force of a minor obsession.

Spiritually he was feeling like "a piece of old absorbent cotton," yet he could muster up spunk to reply to well-meant condolences from Rex O'Malley, with whom he had struck up a friendship during their trooping days in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*:

Please note that I am in no need of your God damned sympathy. I know that you are addicted to visiting the sick and have yourself vaguely confused with Florence Nightingale, but I ask only to be entertained by some of your grosser reminiscences.

Hospital life rasped his soul. Daily he demanded to go back to his island. It was inaccessible. The rotting ice still possessed the lake; travel across its surface was impossible. Quit the hospital he must. Neysa McMein Baragwanath, with a piece of her hip-bone grafted upon the spine, was slowly convalescing under the care of a nurse. She invited

her old friend and one-time suitor to come and share her quarters and her nurse. Aleck accepted with joy.

The Baragwanath apartment is large and luxurious, but it is not precisely a haven of rest. Between them, the invalids had twenty-seven visitors in one day. It was too much for Aleck. He collapsed and was carried off to Bomoseen by the vigilant Hennessey, the ice having meantime gone out, for an enforced retirement.

Health returned but vigour lagged. Editorial requests littered his desk. He could not spur himself to effective work. He would promise contributions only to find himself unable to deliver. The doubt returned upon him that his effective working days were over. Maybe there was nothing left for him but to revert to an earlier defeatist intention of buying a gondola and a telescope and spending the remainder of his years lying on his cushioned back in contemplation of the universe.

At least he could catch up with his arrears of correspondence and thus get himself back into the habit of writing. "Fuzzy-minded" he might still have been in some degree. If so, he applied himself to his typewriter only in lucid intervals, for the letters of this period are among his most human and vivid. He regarded them as an exercise to keep his mental muscles in play and hoped by daily practice to restore his mind and "resume a long-established habit of earning my living." This failing, there was always the Phalanx and its "Staten Island Gothic cottage" in which the Sauerwen family, coming up for a summer visit, had spent thirty-eight years.

He fretted. He wanted to get back to work. He wanted to get back to the stage. He wanted to get back to friends—games—good, soul-satisfying talk—life. The Hamilton Choir, for whose success he was so largely responsible, was giving what might well be its last recital in the chapel, what was almost certainly the last that Aleck would ever have the chance of hearing. He developed a plan to be taken to commencement in a truck and wheeled beneath an open window where, from his cot, he could hear those young, heart-lifting voices once more. The plan was vetoed. The disappointment caused another breach in his morale.

Monotony preyed upon him. He must have people around him, no matter what the damned doctors said. In his heart, he knew that he would be better alone on the island with Jo Hennessey watchfully on guard. Four years earlier he had written to Howard Dietz that such

a congestion of strong personalities as the Neshobe group was bad for his nerves.

"When you are all gone I feel as if I had been walking in thick soup."

Self-denial, even in self-interest, was not his strong point. He set about gathering the clan, and late in April had made of the island "a house for convalescents: Neysa, George Backer" (who had been at Saranac), "Alicc Miller, me." He was pathetically glad to see them. The visit was not an unqualified success. He would talk feverishly for two hours, two and a half, three hours without pause; then, exhausted, go to his room and cry. He would demand drugs to steady his nerves. Half the time Jo Hennessey would administer a placebo of flavoured water.

But his was an indomitable spirit. By the end of May he was questing about for another play. He wrote Alfred Lunt that he had "a kind of irrational expectation of getting well again, based on nothing more substantial than that I always have."

Invalidism he stubbornly refused to accept. All his life he had abused a long-enduring physique, on the principle that if he treated it rough, it would be good. He wrote me:

Wherefore I have acquired no technique for living on the shelf. When people stand around me in a bright, idiotic chorus, telling me to take everything very easy, I feel like making the response Max Beerbohm made privately to Queen Mary . . . when she asked him to be one of a group of English poets to read from his works at Albert Hall at a Benefit for the Seamen. He replied that he would be glad to accede to her request but that he was too busy; Admiral Beatty had just asked him to take command of one of the battleships in the North Sea.

But within him a dire change was coming about. With a kind of terror he became aware of an emotional atrophy, a sharp contraction of those affections which had bound him to his friends.

"During that illness . . . I underwent a change of life," he wrote to Leggett Brown. "The nerves which governed my capacity for affection died as the nerve of a tooth dies. I found that there are not more than a dozen people in the world of whom I could honestly say that I care two cents whether I ever see them again. To my surprise, you are one of the dozen."

It is doubtful whether he ever fully regained the old warmth. After his physical health was in great measure restored, we find him bewail-

ing himself to Neysa McMein over this creeping frigidity and lamenting that "I can only hurt the people I love."

Old friends are best when the spirit quails. Aleck sent for Edmund Devol, his medical crony of Savenay. He wrote to Lucy Drage in Kansas City:

"Are you flexible enough to pack your bag and come to the island at once? It may be the last time you will see me."

She came at once. So did Devol. Between them they re-established his courage. On the upsurge once more, he bragged of himself as "a rambunctious convalescent." It was a premature boast.

Gallstones seldom remain inert. Towards the end of June Aleck's began to act up again. His heart reacted unfavourably. Hennessey said, "Let's go to Boston and see Levine,"<sup>1</sup> a heart specialist attached to the Peter Bent Brigham hospital whom the sick man had consulted previously. His rambunctiousness cooled by suffering, Aleck raised no objections.

Hospitals are inured to having as patients the eccentric, the great, in fact pretty much the whole gamut of humanity; but the Peter Bent Brigham had never before experienced Alexander Woollcott. He remains something of a legend there.

The travellers arrived at six o'clock of a Monday evening and went to the Ritz, where Aleck telephoned to the hospital. Already apprised of the visit the nurse, following her instructions from the doctor, told Aleck to be there at nine o'clock, when he would be put to bed for a long night's rest, preparatory to a thorough examination in the morning. This suited the patient well. Irving Berlin, Dorothy Gish, and Louis Calhern were in town for the opening of the Berlin musical *This Is The Army*. The Bomoseen pair had cocktails with Berlin, dinner with the two stars, after which Aleck took a taxi to the hospital and Jo Hennessey went to the show and then to bed.

At 5 a.m. Hennessey's telephone rang insistently. The rudely awakened sleeper tottered over to the instrument. A familiar and exasperated voice said:

"I want you to get me a suite."

"Where are you?"

"Down in the lobby."

"Good God! What are you doing here?"

"I want a suite," insisted the voice, adding a self-evident fact, "I've left the hospital."

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Samuel A. Levine

Hastily dressing, Jo went down. No suite was to be had. A room was the only space available. Aleck took that and went to bed.

What had happened at the hospital was this. The patient waked up at dead of night with a severe attack. Correctly identifying the nature of the pain, the house physician ordered a regulation dose of opiates. Steady recourse to the drug had built up an immunity to its action: it did not suffice. Aleck demanded more, and got into a wrangle with the nurse over a suggestion that another type of drug be tried. He insisted that the doctor be called, and at once. While the nurse was gone, he hopped nimbly out of bed, dressed, and presented himself at the entry desk.

"I want a taxi."

"Why, Mr. Woolcott," pleaded the attendant, "you can't leave——"

"I want a taxi. Or do I walk?"

It was raining hard. The taxi was summoned and the recalcitrant patient, his pangs eased or perhaps submerged in his annoyance, made the trip to the hotel.

At eleven the next morning he was back, chipper and unrepentant. X-ray pictures showed the unmistakable presence of the gallstones.

"We'll have to operate," said the physicians.

"Fine! When?"

"Saturday."

"You boys can't lay me open until you promise me one thing."

"Anything in reason," said the doctors doubtfully.

"I have to see a picture before I die."

"You're not going to die, and what's this picture that's so important?"

"The revival of *The Gold Rush*. Charlie Chaplin has dedicated it to me and I'm going to see it if it kills me."

It was arranged for him to leave the hospital for three hours on Friday afternoon. He returned in good spirits, had a night's sleep, and in the morning was operated upon by Dr. Elliott Cutler. The operation was successful. Those resources of rehabilitation which seemed so incongruous in that obese and pampered body asserted themselves again. Recovery was quick and uneventful, and definitely on the ram-bunctious side. One of his post-hospital nurses was stirred by his didoes to the point of composing a poem, not precisely in his honour, but quite definitely inspired by him. Too long for inclusion here, it plainly indicates that she, at least, did *not* find him "practically indistinguishable

from St. Francis of Assisi." It is said (but I do not vouch for the authenticity of the incident) that she attended a late showing of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* film, and vigorously hissed every one of the egregious Whiteside's insults to "Miss Bedpan."

Someone tipped off Walter Winchell to Woolcott's presence at Peter Bent Brigham. He published the news in his *Mirror* column, and the floodgates were opened upon the hospital. Letters and telegrams, flowers, books, and fancy foods poured in. Long-distance inquiries came hourly. A voice with a slight suggestion of alcoholic impediment called up from Newark, N.J., at 1.30 a.m.

"Is ziss Peterbengrig'm Hospital?"

"Yes."

"Is Ms'r A'xander Woolcott there?"

"He is."

"Wh-hat is his condition?"

"Very satisfactory," the hospital reported.

"Christ!" said the voice in the accents of despair as the telephone clicked.

Ethel Barrymore came to visit the distinguished invalid. So did Lynn Fontanne. The Berlins and the principals of *This Is the Army* were in attendance. Writers, public officials, bigwigs of Harvard, and others afforded the interested hospital staff a continuous free show. A staff member was heard to remark wonderingly, "And I'd always heard that Alexander Woolcott was so unpopular!"

Upon the eve of his departure, Aleck confided to his nurse:

"As soon as I'm strong enough I'm going down to New York and shoot that so-and-so, Dr. X. He's the one who said I was insensitive to pain."

A shattering blow fell in July. Alice Duer Miller was dying. She broke the news to Aleck with calm courage in a letter as free from self-pity as from bravado: something that could no longer be kept from a friend. He wrote to Marie Belloc Lowndes:

It will be no surprise to you that she took the bad news in her stride, and accepted it with philosophic serenity, revealing in her letters and her talks only a kind of rueful amusement at her own predicament. Of course, she made everything as easy as possible for those around her, and drifted off at last looking so pretty and benign.

She died in August; "I think you may guess with what courtesy of

grace and spirit Alice made her exit," wrote Aleck. And later, "Here we are trying to adjust ourselves to the bleak fact that there is now no such person in our world as Alice Duer Miller."

With the renewal of health came, of logical sequence, a revival of the Woollcott character *in toto*. This comprised the old, unpredictable flashes of spitefulness so deeply and tragically rooted in his ego. When he believed himself to have only a few months to live, he had an impulse to call off the unilateral feud with Harold Ross and invited him, with a hint of the old affection, to come to Bomoseen. *The New Yorker* editor replied that he would be glad to accept and suggested that they touch briefly upon the "Sergeant Quirt" matter (the passage in *The New Yorker Profile* about Aleck's old buddy who had served time) and thereafter forget it.

Not for Aleck! By the time he got around to answering, he was feeling better; he guessed he wasn't going to die right away, after all. He warned Ross that their correspondence was becoming "misleadingly friendly"; if he did see his former friend it wouldn't be under wraps. Who did Ross think he was, anyway? *Der Führer*? In good old vitriolic style Aleck wrote:

Only the Hitlers of this world can issue their own statements on a controversial matter and then order the subject closed. . . . I have, as you probably know, a reason for wanting to put my house in order. I obeyed the impulse to let you know that all the warmth had gone out of the grudge I held against you and that there was no reason why we should ever meet without an exchange of friendly greeting. We once had a friendship which was in many ways unique in my life and which I both cherished and enjoyed. Perhaps the rupture of such a friendship can never be healed, but certainly it could not be attempted in our case until after the whole issue between us had been thrashed out to its last detail. I certainly should not enjoy such a parley any more than you would.

He left the door open a small crack, though by no means graciously. The erstwhile friends did not meet again.

That must have left a scar. A graver quarrel inflicted a deeper wound.

Neysa McMein, her fractured back still supersensitive and requiring frequent rests, came to the island in early October. The foliage being at its most glorious, the host planned a tour on the mainland. With him went Richard Wood, Grace Eustis, and Neysa, on her stipulation that they be back within three hours so that she might stretch out at full length as prescribed. As the car progressed deeper and deeper into

the mountains, the passengers reminded Aleck of the time. He was getting vast enjoyment out of the scenery and, with that selfishness which at times excluded all sense of obligation to others, impatiently put off every suggestion. The sufferer appealed to him directly, "Oh, Woollc! My back is hurting me so!"

His reply was that they had not yet seen the best of the show. When she angrily reproached him for his callousness, he ignored it and, as they finally neared the boat landing, muttered to the others:

"It's lucky I *know* who my friends are. I'll never go to her place again."

The day was spoiled for him. He sulked all that evening and was still sulking when his once favourite guest left. Remorse set in too late. She wrote back from New York that she was still fond of him, but, much though they meant to one another, it was better that they should be apart for a while.

He mournfully acquiesced. George Backer, he wrote, thought that something had gone awry with him psychically; that some emotional nerve was paralysed.

"But I think it is gone," said he. ". . . So I agree."

Neither Aleck nor Neysa thought the alienation permanent. They never saw one another again.

Through the ups and downs of his fluctuating health, he managed to do a fair amount of work, and to plan more.

Thornton Wilder was still "pinching and nudging" him about that Phalanx book. He really must get at that. Starting from there he could work along to *Under Separate Gover*, which should differ from other contemporary autobiographies in its unsparing and Rousseau-like honesty of revelation. He bewailed his negligence in not having kept a diary throughout the years. Viking wanted a *Third Reader*, though his own opinion was that the second had been a retrograde from the first. Still, he would like to do it, if only to include Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, for which he professed an inordinate admiration. The idea of a Holmes biography still tempted him. The success of an oft-repeated Holmes-Lincoln anecdote convinced him of public interest in the subject.

All of these claims, however, were secondary in his mind to the war. He was "reluctant in times like these to undertake any new project which does not seem to me a form of public service." The offer from the *Louisville Courier-Journal* to go on the air regularly from their



station, WHAS, was favourably considered chiefly because it would afford opportunity to do missionary work through a medium of wide circulation in a region disaffected towards England and America's participation in the war. To help bring his own country into line was, for him, by his own word "the only thing that matters."

He went to Washington and made the rounds, "asking and listening and hoping thereby to find out what I can do . . . and what I might best attempt to do." The suggestion that eased his questing mind came from Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. England had brought out a compact anthology, compounded of classics and trivia, designed for the reading of the men in the services and called appropriately *The Knapsack*. Something of the kind, suggested Frankfurter, ought to be done for our men, and the compiler of the two *Woollcott Readers* was the man to do it. If a Justice of the United States Supreme Court held this opinion, it was good enough for Woollcott. He concurred.

He postponed all the lucrative offers and set to work upon the collection for which he chose the title *As You Were*. Ten of his writing friends were enlisted as an advisory jury. When their selections came in, he dropped them into the waste-basket and did his own picking. His labour was a contribution to the war effort: he took no royalties. The Viking Press published the book on a non-profit basis. The result was only moderately successful. Many of the critics complained that the Woollcott selectiveness was directed to his own taste first and that of his embattled readers second.

This being off his hands, he now felt himself at liberty to make some money, which he needed, as his medical expenses had been extremely heavy. So he invited to dinner at Voisin's his old classmate, Alex F. Osborn, head of the Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn advertising agency. Woollcott broached a plan for going back on the air, not to broadcast nationally but to settle down in some mid-western city and do a strictly local series. Osborn pointed out how meagre the pay would be for such a project. The B.F. Goodrich Company was thinking of going on the air nationally. So Osborn asked Woollcott to work with him on a plan of his own by which, on five nights each week, a five-minute broadcast might be put on by Woollcott over the Columbia Network with Goodrich as sponsor.

Because Columbia officials knew how troublesome Woollcott could be, the question of releasing time for him was put up to President William Paley. One evening after hours, Alex Osborn and Aleck

Woollcott called on him at his office on Madison Avenue. Paley made it forcefully clear that if Woollcott was to broadcast over Columbia he would have to stay within bounds. The meeting ended amicably. Since the rest of the staff had left for the day, Paley personally escorted his callers to the elevator. In the anteroom Woollcott looked at a large framed picture and said, "Bill, I want that. I'll take it with me." Hardly waiting for Paley's consent, Woollcott whipped the picture from its hook and carried it home.

The series was to be one of innocuous story-telling programmes and the search for an appropriate title—always a difficult point—brought forth from Osborn the suggestion of "To-day's Best Story." It rebounded promptly from the Town Crier's typical disapproval:

As a listener, my reaction to the invitation implied in "To-day's Best Story" would be: "Oh, it is, is it!" It is the mark of the amateur story-teller that he usually begins with some such alienating phrase as: "Here's a story you'll like," or "Here's a good one that'll make you laugh." I can seldom move fast enough to interject, "Perhaps you'd better let me be the judge of that." Invariably I find that the story offered as something sure to make me laugh turns out to be one which leaves me somewhat short of rolling on the floor.

The title was abandoned.

His health slowly deteriorated in the fall. His weight had dropped to one hundred and sixty pounds. Nevertheless, he resolutely continued to lecture and to broadcast twice a week. Now when he went to the studio, Dr. Devol was in attendance to keep watch over the heightened blood pressure which testified to the strain. The vertigo, the erratic vision, and the numbness of limb grew gradually worse. He must carry nitroglycerin tablets with him, to counteract heart attack. He could still enjoy life at the island, being tooled about in a jinricksha which had amazingly turned up, in answer to his advertisement, in a Vermont barn; playing with the dogs; getting acquainted with half a dozen carrier pigeons which Ned Sheldon had sent to him bearing a presentation message. His human visitors were limited by his capacity for the strain. Rex O'Malley came to cheer him up, presumptively with "some of your grosser reminiscences." Eleanora von Mendelssohn was in frequent and devoted attendance, massaging the numbness from his insensitized arms and leg, ready at any hour to read to him or listen to his talk. Noel Coward came and stayed but two days. They parted not in hostility but in mutual intolerance of their clashing

egotisms. The pity of it is that they should not have met understandingly upon the higher level which both had achieved, for Coward, like Aleck, responsive to the test of a great cause, had now submerged his self-interest in dedication to an intense and superbly expressive patriotism.

The harsh tonic of Pearl Harbour had worked out through pessimism to a modified and reasonable optimism as Woollcott saw his country closing ranks in united war effort. There was still in his wasted physique a reserve of energy. His resolution was unimpaired, his spirit eager. At whatever cost, at whatever risk, he must, if he were not to dishonour the old Phalanx idealism, seek action again.

He swung back into flood tide of ambition and endeavour.

## 35

23 JANUARY 1943

NINETY-NINE per cent of ageing humanity slumps out of existence, spiritless and flaccid. Alexander Woollcott was of the fortunate fraction. He met death on the upswing.

He had it all figured out. The medical faculty might prescribe with uplifted finger, "You mustn't. You can't. Don't do this. Give up that. Be careful." It was the business of the doctor to keep you alive, muffled in cotton-wool if need be and insulated against all the hazards of activity. It was his own concern not merely to keep alive—he was no amoeba in jelly, he observed tartly—but to go right ahead and live; to give to and get from life what he still might. If it cut a few weeks or months from his span, who cared? Not Aleck. Nobody but a coward would want to keep the rickety machine going on such terms. Come hell or high water he was "going to have another go at things."

There was no lack of things to go at. "With radio proposals," he noted complacently, "the air has never been so thick." He was interested in them chiefly as a means of stimulating national pride and spirit. Asked to outline a programme for the General Electric Company, he suggested a weekly half-hour of words and music, exploiting "the inexhaustible riches of courage and vitality and adventure in the American past and present." He could see himself "throwing all my weight"

into such a project. Whether or not it made money for him was a negligible consideration.

Promised magazine articles kept him happily busy. *The Atlantic Monthly* was holding space for him. His Roving Editor contract with *The Reader's Digest*, which called for an article for every issue, suited him admirably, since DeWitt Wallace was giving him a free hand. The editorial chief would sit down with his contributor to a discussion of such projects as Aleck had in mind, with invariably fertile results. Wallace was struck with Woollcott's "eagerness on every occasion not to fail us in having an acceptable article ready for the next issue." The subject being agreed upon, Aleck would work into it his untainted and still excited interest in things and people, his easy wit, his spunglass decorations of memory and allusion. His early prejudice against the magazine had vanished. Nor had he any reason now to complain of the *Digest* public's unresponsiveness. He was a popular feature.

His last contribution was reminiscent, in the method of its production, of his working day when in his physical prime. He got up that morning at seven o'clock, worked all day over the article, finished and sent it off in the morning's mail. The old drive. The old power of concentration. The old, confident sense of workmanship. Back came the response from the magazine, echoing the writer's oft-reiterated formula (this time not needed in self-defence): one of the best pieces he had ever done. Faith in himself was restored. He was as good as ever!

He itched to return to the stage. Where was that play in which he and Harpo Marx were to double? Wasn't it about time for the Kaufman-Hart combination to figure out another medium for him? Or Charley MacArthur and Ben Hecht? Nobody could say that he hadn't been pretty good in *The Man Who Came to Dinner*; not in his presence, anyway. Surely the public, which had eaten up that one, was ready by now for another Woollcott comedy.

Meanwhile [he wrote in January 1943] my life retains some of its familiar colour. For example, my breakfast guest on Wednesday was Sergt. Heywood Broun and I went to lunch with Marian Anderson. I'm dining to-morrow night with Irving Bacheller, who is eighty-five if he's a day, which he certainly is.<sup>1</sup>

His personal interests were never keener. He was planning a Kansas City reunion with Sophie Rosenberger in the fall to celebrate the

<sup>1</sup> Aleck's estimate was a year out. Bacheller was then a vigorous eighty-four.

fiftieth anniversary of his entrance into her class, and adjuring her to be sure to keep alive for it. He was figuring on extending young Al Getman's education by sending him to Hamilton. Eighteenth-century pamphleteering had long interested him (Don Marquis, the columnist and playwright, had had the same idea); he thought the twentieth century would profit by a revival. As soon as he could find time, he would get around to it. A lot of good men were already, or might be brought to be, interested in it: Christopher Morley, Felix Frankfurter, Bernard de Voto, E. B. White, F.P.A. It might be employed as a tonic to war spirit. And it was about time to start work on his autobiography.

Minor manifestations of weakness he noted without concern. Ninety-three-year-old Mrs. Richards's handwriting, he remarked with admiration, was "strong, steady, so much better than this," his own. Only a few days before her death she had sent him greetings:

Happy New Year.

War or no war, it's God's year and we take it thankfully.

Affectionate remembrances always from

Laura E. Richards.

When Aleck learned of her death he wrote at once to her daughter, ending with the exultant tribute:

"What a triumphant life!"

It was, so far as is known, the last letter from his pen.

His policy was cheerfully to ignore probabilities. Coffee was forbidden. He continued to take it, though in fractional quantities as compared to his former excesses.

"I'd like a second cup," he told Rex and Mrs. Stout, who were dining with him at Voisin's, where in January he was giving a series of small and intimate (possibly farewell?) dinners; "but I'm under promise to get back to the hotel alive."

Smoking was bad for him. He cut down on but refused to abjure cigarettes. Alcohol was dangerous. He chose his wines with as great particularity as ever. He had a pre-birthday dinner on the eighteenth with George Backer and a post-birthday dinner with Bea Kaufman on the twentieth: pompano, white wine, a rich dessert, and a cordial. Only a week before he died he said to an intimate, discussing the resources of invalidism:

"I have always kept enough money to carry on my present scale of living for two years. After that, it doesn't interest me."

"You can't determine the duration of your life," objected the friend.

"Can't I!" said Aleck significantly.

General arteriosclerosis was slowing him down. Night attacks became more frequent and painful. He would prop himself up in bed and fight it through. He must now (to his distaste, since he resented having to make concessions to his health) carry nitroglycerin tablets in his pocket wherever he went.

"I don't want to look like an invalid," he fretted.

Admonitions to slow up, take it easy, only provoked him to impatience. Any call to aid in the war effort was a "must" for him. The Writers' War Board and The People's Platform programme invited him to appear with Rex Stout, Chairman of the Board, Harry D. Gideonse, George N. Shuster, and Marcia Davenport. The subject was "Is Germany Incurable?" with Dr. Gideonse in the chair; the place, Aleck's familiar stamping ground, the CBS studio. Dinner was served in the studio's private dining-room where the microphones were ready. Since the programme was a "discussion programme," there was no rehearsal. Aleck had sent word to Dr. Devol not to come; it would be an easy evening, he would be under no strain. During the meal he developed one of his argumentative moods. He objected, though without ill-humour, to certain of the opinions set forth. Some expressions on Shuster's part of tolerance for non-Nazi Germany seemed to annoy him. He became very earnest; Leon Levine, directing the programme, noticed with concern his flushed face. Stout, too, began to have misgivings and tried to turn the talk into neutral channels. The others knew nothing of Aleck's precarious hold on life and so took no special note.

After dinner Aleck took coffee, of which he had ordered an extra supply. He grew tense over what Stout thought was only a second cup, but which may have been more than that. Halfway through it he was checked by Stout's leaning over and taking the cup away. Aleck nodded assentingly and seemed to make an effort to pull himself together. The doors were closed and the programme began.

If he was at less than his best and most vigorous, it was not apparent to his associates. His voice had the full ring of vehement conviction when, in contravention to a suggestion that a distinction should be drawn between Hitler and the German people, he declared:

"Germany was the cause of Hitler just as much as Chicago is responsible for the *Chicago Tribune*."

Gideonse protested that this was something less than fair to the people of Chicago. There was some confusion of opinion from the different participants; a belief expressed as to the long-run possibility of making Germany a law-abiding member of the community of nations; then Woollcott's full-toned statement: "I think time may do it."

It was his last utterance over the air. Stout saw him begin to tremble. Gideonse, too, observed that he was weaving nervously in his chair and wondered whether so seasoned a veteran could possibly be suffering from belated mike fright.

Since no word extraneous to the topic under discussion is permitted after the mikes are tuned in, any vocal communication from the Town Crier was impracticable. He got around the difficulty by reaching for a sheet of paper and pencilling on it in large letters:

#### I AM SICK.

This he held up for Gideonse and Stout to read. Both started to rise. He motioned them back with a gesture interpretable as, "I'll be all right, but don't expect any more talking from me."

The programme continued. Aleck tried to push himself back from the table. He slumped in his chair. Gideonse, a large and powerful man, reached him first and half-supported, half-carried him out into the corridor, settling him on a bench near the elevator.

"I'm dying," he said.

Ignorant of the medical history and in view of Woollcott's spirited participation in the debate, the chairman naturally thought this an exaggeration, but set about finding help none the less.

In the Control Room, Levine's experienced ear had caught the alien noise of a chair scuffing on the floor. Surmising what might have happened, he called the head receptionist, Miss Mac MacNair, who was a Graduate Nurses' Aid. As she bent over Woollcott, he was muttering, "I'm sick. I'm sick. Where are my tablets? Get my glycerin tablets."

Though they were not to be found, and would have been unavailing in, any case, the sick man made a partial recovery and turned to Gideonse with a reiterated and urgent injunction.

"Go back in there. Never mind me. Go back in there."

He was gamely living up to the trouper's tradition: the show must go on.

Satisfied that the patient was in good hands and medical help on the way, the chairman returned to his duties.

Unable to speak further, Aleck retained the vitality and will power to scrawl with his pencil Dr. Devol's telephone number.

Devol, friend and physician, was sitting at the moment anxiously before his radio. He had of late been accompanying Aleck to his studio appointments, but Aleck had suggested that, as this would be an easy programme without the strain of rehearsal, the physician might as well take an evening off. When several minutes of the discussion elapsed without anything from the Town Crier, Devol became apprehensive. His movement towards the telephone coincided with the call from the studio. He hurried thither to find the programme concluded and Aleck unconscious and breathing heavily. He called in another physician. A police emergency squad was rushed to the scene with oxygen-tank equipment.

Meantime the studio's switchboard was swamped with calls from listeners who, missing Woolcott from the air, had called up to find out what was wrong.

Those who knew of Woolcott's physical weakness supposed that it was another heart attack. It was worse: a cerebral haemorrhage. On one side the arm and leg were "dead." There seemed still a chance that he might be saved. An ambulance transferred him to the Roosevelt Hospital.

Prolonging his life would have been a tragic salvage. What remained to him could have been no better than a half-life. He would have been permanently crippled, which he could have borne; but he could never have recovered his mental keenness, his mind would have struggled to the end in a slow obscuration, and that would have been a hell for him. No friend of his could have wished him such a travesty on recovery.

At midnight, between a Saturday and Sunday, the air waves announced the death of the Town Crier.



## REQUIESCAT

ONE of the Phalanx aunts used to say "death's anti-climax is the funeral." Alexander Woolcott, child of the Phalanx, had the same feeling. His long-planned book of early memoirs, "Two Funerals at the Phalanx," would have treated the titular ceremonials in a mildly satirical vein. He did not wholly eschew such observances; he might occasionally attend out of duty, as at the obsequies of Alexander Humphreys, out of loyalty as in the case of Walter McMartin, or out of his affection for Al Getman; or he might abstain out of emotion, as when he paced the floor of his New York apartment while his young friend, Duncan Saunders, was being buried on College Hill. But on principle he disapproved.

It was none the less inevitable that his friends should signalize his death in some public manner. This took the form of a memorial service at the McMillin Academic Theatre of Columbia University, attended by some five hundred persons, largely celebrities. George Backer presided, Ruth Gordon, Lloyd Paul Stryker, and Dean Carl W. Ackerman spoke, and Paul Robeson read the Twenty-third Psalm.

As to the final disposition of his remains, Aleck had never cared much. His body had not served him too well. Living, he had mistreated it as an impatient engineer might abuse a recalcitrant piece of mechanism. After he was through with it, he would not be of a mind to give it serious consideration. Since he was known to advocate cremation as a sanitary and convenient practice, the body was cremated.

For a time there was uncertainty as to what was to be done with the ashes. Harpo Marx mournfully suggested that, as the most suitable commitment, they be blown through the fifth wicket of the Bomoseen croquet ground. Members of the family were inclined towards the Phalanx. Then it came out that Aleck had expressed to several of his fellow alumni a sentiment, albeit somewhat vague, about lying in the Hamilton College cemetery; "the last dormitory" as he emotionally termed it. So it was decided.

The final curtain came in July 1943. The ashes had been shipped from Bomoseen, but not direct to destination. Colgate, object of Aleck's traditional aspersions, is at Hamilton, N.Y., some thirty miles from

Clinton, above which lies the Hamilton campus. Confusion between the two institutions is not infrequent. The funeral urn was sent to Colgate and returned to Hamilton with sixty-seven cents extra charge pointedly attached to the waybill. Aleck, alive, would have made something of that.

The interment was designedly simple, in keeping with Aleck's impatience of ceremony. A score of his college friends were there; the Roots, the Rudds, the Saunderses among them, and a few who had come into his orbit later. There were brief, informal words of friendship. The urn was lowered into the grave. Thus Dorothy Parker's twenty-year-old wisecrack became a prophecy fulfilled:

"When Aleck dies, he'll go to Hamilton."

The obituary notices were profuse and, on the laudatory side, ranged from the judicially amiable to the richly enthusiastic. Aleck's own notion of a fitting epitaph for himself, offered at a time when the occasion for its use seemed far distant, was jocularly modest.

"After all he wasn't a bad chap. May he rest in peace."

In the same spirit of wistful deprecation, he endorsed as a potential inscription for his tombstone little Marie Osland-Hill's verdict, embodied in that letter which he thought destined to the immortality of the anthologies:

"Too hasty but not a bad man."

His fellow writers, with a few exceptions, did better by him. Implicit in their opinions was recognition of the fact that his faults, foibles, and offences could fairly be condoned as the expression and outlet of the constant inner irritations to which his ill-balanced personality laid him pitifully open. True, he did some harm. He hurt innocent people. He added in minor ways to the frictions of society. But these manifestations were not the index of his underlying character; they were the trivia of a life which was, on the larger scale, inspired by idealism and dedicated to service. He was recognized by his peers as instinctively honourable and high-principled in essentials, unfailingly loyal and courageous.

The testimony of his contemporaries was strongest on the side of his fighting spirit, to which the circumstances of his death gave point. His old and favourite forum, *The New Yorker*, found consolation in the happy chance "that he died with his boots on, as we knew he would, in a public brawl as thousands cheered. . . . He was a good patriot and his loyalty to God and Country occasionally achieved the majesty of thunder." Walter Winchell felt the same way about him.

"It probably would have tickled the Town Crier to know he would make his last exit, bickering. He was that sort of fellow. He figured the best way to die was in harness."

The *Herald Tribune*, granting that Woollcott was "somewhat difficult . . . guilty of affectation on many occasions . . . could be childishly petulant" found him "in his way as much the fighting American as any of the heroes whose deeds always brought a lump to his throat," and "above all else a good citizen with a high sense of obligation to his country and his time."

Writing in *The Nation*, Edmund Wilson pointed out that "one might be very far from sharing most of his enthusiasms, and very much dislike his way of expressing them and yet feel that his lights were not vulgar ones and that Woollcott never betrayed them. . . . In the days of totalitarian states and commercial standardization, he did not hesitate to assert himself as a single, unique human being; he was not afraid to be Alexander Woollcott, and even when Alexander Woollcott was horrid, this somehow commanded respect . . . and made him a kind of folk hero."

Elizabeth Beckwith threw another angle of light upon his complex character and its reflection upon his time when she wrote, "His death removes a source of exhilaration." That seems to me as satisfying an encomium as any public entertainer could hope for.

Maclay Lyon, in the *Kansas City Times*, considered that Woollcott's "success as a writer remained for ever secondary to his fame as a personality," a view which presumably would not have displeased the man who boasted that he was "born in Macy's show window." Danton Walker, however, thought that Woollcott had received less than his just due as a writer. In his column in the *News* (N.Y.) he reflected that, if a man is traditionally no hero to his valet he is even less likely to be to his secretary, and set forth that "it was as his secretary . . . that I came to know and admire him as a person, respect him as an employer, and regard him with something like awe for his amazing mastery of the English language, a gift that has been passed over by most of the obit writers."

Crediting Woollcott with "a sharp taste," Walter Lippmann further noted: "He had a piercing eye for sham. He had an acid tongue. But he had gusto; he really liked what he praised, and he cared much more for the men and women he liked than he worried about those he did not like."

Jack Pulaski in *Variety* paid tribute to the too little appreciated Woolcott kindness.

"Privately he was a humanitarian . . . and he helped many an author into the limelight by unstinting praise, either by radio or in type."

Aleck's old friend, Booth Tarkington, in a gay and tender appreciation in *The Atlantic*, testified to that same response to life and to people which had impressed Walter Lippmann.

"He had such unction in living, such love of life and such buoyant ecstasy in the very life he led that only death itself, and never the imminent threat of it, could change him." And "Tark" who has, himself, preserved that same keenness untarnished by the years, envisages his friend after death "waking a little confusedly in the undiscovered country; then promptly finding himself and at once hastening to find others—to seek out Mr. Justice Holmes and tell him all about Dr. Eckstein, to discover Mrs. Fiske and tell her all about Mrs. Roosevelt. I think he would look up Mr. and Mrs. Borden and ask them exactly how much they remember about what happened to them; but perhaps, and almost before doing anything else, I think, he would rush to Alice Duer Miller, who would know nearly everything, to inquire where Charles Dickens lives."

Others saw this very exuberance, for which Woolcott had been criticized and derided (often, it must be conceded, with justice), as a virtue. "Dear Aleck, whether in a waspish or a honey-bee mood, you were always winged," wrote F. Tennyson Jesse, bidding him farewell through the columns of the *Manchester Guardian*.

Almost all the eulogists commented upon his literary integrity. Dean Ackerman, of the Columbia School of Journalism, emphasized his "deep sense of responsibility for the use he made of words." To the *World-Telegram* his professional creed "signified the right of every man of letters to do as he pleased. The writing world is always beset by owlish men who demand conformity. Woolcott's whole career contradicted them."

This independence of spirit impressed H. L. Mencken as Woolcott's outstanding virtue.

"The town has seldom produced an eminentissimo who was less the copy-cat and more his own man."

The commentators were not unanimous in praise. There was a tinge of acid in the terms in which E. B. White of *Harper's* wrote of his former fellow-New-Yorker, as "the hardest working actor I have ever

known; he gave a continuous performance like a movie. . . . His literary taste was so capricious that it occasionally made even his best friends wince, but his acting (as long as he kept free of the legitimate stage) was flawless."

"Alexander Woollcott," wrote Stewart Holbrook "was the O. O. McIntyre of the sophisticates," which, as an epigram, is hardly dazzling enough to blind an informed reader to its absurdity.

More to his taste than any professional encomium, I suspect, recalling his pleasure in the negro cook's testimonial to the "voodoo in dat voice," would have been the following expression from an amateur source; one ripple on the great flood of grief and deprivation that bore in upon the newspapers and the broadcasting stations, following the news of the Town Crier's death. It is a letter to the *Atlantic City Press* from Mrs. Walter Reynolds.

So he is gone, our Town Crier. Just when we needed him most, he is taken. May I speak for the millions of his radio friends the housewives who keep the radio on the kitchen dresser, the lonely old people, the poor, the neglected, the weary and heavy-hearted who all loved him? How often have I thought of writing to him to express my pleasure at one of his radio commentaries. But a natural timidity and fear of intruding on his busy life restrained me. Now it is for ever too late, but at least I can add my humble tribute.

You see, he was our Mr. Woollcott. He belonged to us all. Under the suavity and charm, we felt the essential boyishness of his spirit. He was our Laughing Philosopher, whose laughter was not cruel, who laughed with us and not at us and could even lead the laugh against himself.

I never saw even a picture of him. They tell me he was a big man. He would have to be, he had such a big heart, a compassionate heart that felt 'He knows a man best who knows the best about him.' So he died in the harness. That was as he would wish, for never did he fail to pull his share of the load. Was there ever a man who had more friends?

Fare thee well, blithe spirit, our dear teller of tales. Wherever in God's universe you are to-day you will find some way of helping those around you and of doing it with a smile. May God be good to you, my friend, for He knows that while you tarried on this earth you loved your fellow man.

"He has outsoared the shadow of our night,  
Envy and calumny and hate and pain,  
And that unrest which men miscall delight  
Can touch him not and torture not again;  
From the contagion of the world's slow stain  
He is secure, and now can never mourn  
A heart grown cold, a head grown grey—in vain."

MARY B. REYNOLDS.

Both among admirers and detractors it has become something of a cliché to say that Alexander Woolcott was a man peculiar to his day, who, in another age might never have emerged from obscurity. This verdict seems to me to ignore the essential of his individuality. Given a powerful will, a defined and unswerving purpose, a mind rigorously trained for and doggedly directed to its own ends, and a gift for self-expression falling little short of genius, their possessor is not likely to remain submerged in any throng. In another and earlier environment Woolcott might have found a different medium; he might have been a beau with Brummel and Austin, an emotion-rouser with Moody and Sankey or Billy Sunday, a flaming revolutionary with Robespierre, or an inspired crusader with Peter the Hermit; he would always and inevitably have sought and found the limelight and the glow wherein he basked would not have been to his own advantage alone. It would have shed a pleasurable radiance upon the surrounding atmosphere.

Nobody since his death has in any degree filled Woolcott's unique place. Whether one deems his loss important or insignificant, it is, within its measure, irremediable. It leaves a vacuum.

A fellow journalist whose acquaintance with him was slight and casual has, I think, best summed up his place in the contemporary scene.

"I knew him as a friendly man with a vast zest for living," wrote Harry Hansen in the *World-Telegram*. "When he told a good story, mathematicians chuckled, watchmakers forgot the time, and engineers put aside their blueprints. Now the landscape seems a bit greyer and more cheerless. It can't all be the fault of bituminous coal."

Anyone of whom that last can truly be said has added to the amenity as well as to the gaiety of nations and left his world the better for having lived in it.

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